修学旅行で仲良くないグループに入りました
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School Trip: Joined a Group I’m Not Close To

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School Trip: Joined a Group I’m Not Close To

by didarlasaiq

Summary

When Hioki unexpectedly gets invited into a group of four handsome boys for the class trip, he feels anxious about how things will turn out. To his surprise, the trip is far more enjoyable than he ever imagined, perhaps thanks to Watarai, who always seems to look out for him.

As Hioki begins to open his heart to the kind and gentle Watarai, something beneath that warmth starts to show. What once seemed like simple kindness slowly begins to look more like obsession.

A coming-of-age BL story that begins with a school trip, where beauty meets ordinariness and affection deepens into something far more complicated.

Notes

Hi everyone! I’m here to say that I translated this novel for myself, but I’d be glad if you left some comments! You can also find me on TikTok. And hopefully, I won’t get the AO3 author curse — I don’t run a political party, and I’m posting all three chapters at once!

A translation of School trip: joined a group I’m not close to by Ongi Uzura

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Characters

Hioki (uke) — Can't handle being in a different class from his close friends. Watarai (seme) — Wants to be friends with Hioki but doesn't know how. Hotta, Nakasato, Morisaki, Tsujitani, Ino — Members of the same club as Hioki.

———

(What should I do…?)

Amid the noisy chatter of the classroom, I stared blankly at the schedule sheet on my desk. It wasn't that I had a deadline today or was worried about tomorrow's timetable. I shifted my gaze to the blackboard and reread the words written there.

"School Trip – Group Selection"

A deep sigh escaped me.

Yes, right now, the class was in the middle of deciding groups for what was supposedly going to be a once-in-a-lifetime school trip.

Not exactly the time to be zoning out at a timetable.

It's not like I don't have any friends.

It's just that my close friends ended up in another class. This class is full of people I only have shallow connections with.

(Why do they even hold the school trip in June…?)

Another sigh.

October would've been perfect — by then, everyone would've gotten to know each other better.

Apparently, the schedule changed this year.

Teachers really overestimate high schoolers' social skills. Making close friends from scratch in such a short time? Impossible. At least for me.

To be honest, not going at all had crossed my mind.

But my homeroom teacher kept glancing at me, probably worried about why I wasn't joining any group, and it was starting to get on my nerves.

If I didn't go, my parents would probably ask if something happened at school, so that option was quickly crossed off the list.

"…What?"

I looked up—well, half-looked up—at the boy standing slightly to my side.

"Hioki, you haven't picked a group yet? Wanna join ours?"

The boy grinned broadly as he said it.

If I remember right, his name was Hotta. I think we went to the same middle school. But we were never that close.

"I haven't really—"

"Then it's settled! Come on!"

Hey, hey, at least let me finish talking.

Why me, anyway? Who's even in the group?

I had a million questions, but Hotta wasn't listening. He grabbed my arm and dragged me toward his group—presumably his friends.

"Hey, guys! Hioki's joining our group too!"

"…"

I haven't said yes to anything yet.

And wait—

They're giving me that Who the hell is this? look.

Not that I know any of them either.

"Oi! They're not welcoming me at all! Why'd you even bring me here?!"

"What? Everyone agreed to it."

“Agreed my ass!”

Unable to stand the awkward atmosphere, I pulled on Hotta’s arm this time and whispered my complaint near his ear.

But the answer that came back wasn’t at all what I expected. Agreed? What part of this looks like that?

“I already asked this, but why me—”

“Hey, since it’s decided, can I go ahead and write your name down?”

Does no one in this group listen to people?

I let go of Hotta’s hand and turned toward the voice.

The boy holding the sheet where group members’ names were written glanced briefly at our hands before fixing his eyes on me.

Someone I’ve barely talked to.

His name was… uh—

“Watarai, right? Is it okay if I join?”

I barely managed to say it.

Getting his name wrong would’ve made things even more awkward—thank god. Well, actually, I’m not even sure if I got it right.

“……Ah, yeah. I’m Watarai. Nice to meet you.”

After a strange, heavy pause, Watarai replied and quickly looked away. Doesn’t seem like I made a great impression.

Maybe I should’ve smiled or something.

“Next to Watarai is Nakasato, and next to him is Morisaki.”

While Watarai was writing down my name, Hotta introduced the other two. Nakasato greeted me with a bright, friendly grin, while Morisaki gave a casual “’Sup,” then immediately looked back down at his phone.

Hey, seriously? You’re just gonna play on your phone like that? It’s gonna get confiscated.

Worried we'd get caught, I subtly shifted my body to block the teacher's view, shielding Morisaki from sight.

It was pretty much forced, but at least my group was decided. Morisaki finally put his phone away, so I let out a small sigh of relief and borrowed an empty chair nearby.

While half-listening to the four of them chatting beside me, I glanced toward the front of the classroom—and met the eyes of our homeroom teacher, who looked visibly relieved. Sorry for worrying you, sensei.

Though honestly, I'm still anxious about how this will turn out.

When I turned back toward the group, my eyes happened to meet Watarai's. Remembering how awkward our first exchange had been, I gave him a small, polite smile this time.

To my surprise, instead of looking away like before, he blinked slightly and smiled back.

Guess he's kind of moody… probably.

We were chatting about our clubs and how we totally didn't want to take the quiz in the next class — things that had nothing to do with the school trip — when the teacher's voice echoed across the classroom.

"Alright! Since you've all got your groups, next you'll form groups for free activity time on the second day. These will be mixed-gender groups, okay?"

For a moment, the classroom fell silent.

Then came a chorus of groans and complaints.

Figures.

A quick glance to my side showed that the four of them looked just as unhappy — their faces practically said "No thanks" in bold letters.

Morisaki muttered "This sucks," and leaned against Watarai. Man, that guy's attitude and mouth are both awful.

Apparently, the senior class — this year's third-years — caused some kind of trouble during their free time last year, so now we have to form mixed-gender groups to "keep each other in check."

Seriously, everything keeps changing for our year.

“Okay, hurry up and decide,” the teacher said before heading out to grab the trip guides from the staff room.

The moment she disappeared, complaints erupted all around the room. Amid the noise, I could hear voices saying things like, “What should we do?”

Honestly, I couldn’t care less.

I figured I’d just go along with whatever group Hotta and the others chose or got invited to.

But then…

I started noticing something.

We were being watched.

A few girls’ groups were sneaking glances — no, staring at us. Like, really staring.

And then it hit me.

Of course they were.

I glanced over at the four sitting beside me.

This group… yeah. They’re all good-looking.

Tall, too. Smart? Who knows.

But overall, definitely top-tier material.

Which only made me wonder even more—

what the hell am I doing in this group?

“Hey, Nakasato-kun, is your group already paired with someone?”

A girl who definitely looked like one of the popular crowd called out to us. Her gaze flickered toward Watarai and Morisaki more than once. Ah, I see. So those two are the targets.

“We haven’t yet,” Nakasato replied with his usual easy smile. “We were just thinking we’d join up with whoever’s left.”

He didn't follow it up with a "Then let's pair up," and instead waited for her reply — even though he probably already knew exactly what she'd say. Kind of a sly guy, actually.

"Then—! Why don't you team up with us? Please?"

Another girl peeked out from behind the first one, blurting out the expected line.

"What do you think?" Nakasato asked, glancing around. "I'm fine with it," said Hotta.

"It's just for the free time part, right? Whatever," Morisaki added. "… Mm, yeah. Sure," Watarai mumbled after a slight pause.

When Nakasato's eyes turned to me, I just said, "Yeah, fine."

After hearing everyone's answers, he nodded and turned back to the girls. "Okay then. Looking forward to it."

"Thanks! Let's have fun!" they said, beaming as they went back to their seats, giggling excitedly.

"Totally crushing on us," I muttered.

After the girls left, Nakasato spoke up just loud enough for only us to hear, his eyes shifting toward Watarai and Morisaki.

"You two sure are popular."

"Shut up. That's gross."

"Hey, maybe they're after Hotta."

"Yeah right. Could be you, Nakasato."

"I already feel depressed about free time."

Bit harsh, don't you think?

While I was sitting there, half-listening from the sidelines, Morisaki suddenly looked my way.

"Maybe they're after Hioki."

No way.

I'm not even sure they noticed I exist.

I opened my mouth to deny it, but—

"That's definitely not it."

Watarai answered before I could.

I closed my mouth and nodded along.

Well… he's right, but somehow it stings more hearing it from someone else. Guess that's just how Mr. Moody is.

"So what're we even doing for free time?"

"Let's just feed the deer all day."

"We might not even be going to the deer place."

"Then let's just wander around the temples or something."

"You sound like an old man."

Apparently, they were already brainstorming ways to avoid interacting with the girls. Being kind of left out of the conversation actually felt nice — no need to think too hard.

As I zoned out, the teacher came back holding a stack of trip guides. Our destination: the Kansai region.

Same as in middle school.

The only difference this time was the people.

Hopefully, nothing weird happens.

…Though, if something did change, that might be kind of interesting too.

With that small thought tucked away, I stood up to head back to my seat. We'd been gathered around Watarai's desk, so the other three got up as well. Watarai, ever unpredictable, waved lightly at me. "See you." I waved back and started walking.

Seriously, what is that guy thinking?

□□□

It was still a little chilly in the early morning.

Before I knew it, the day had arrived — the first day of the school trip. I pulled on a cardigan and bent down in the entryway to tie my shoelaces.

“Did you forget anything? Wallet, tissues… got your glasses too?”

My mom came over, her slippers pattering on the floor as she checked my luggage. “You packed everything you need, right?” she asked again, eyeing my suitcase.

“I checked last night. I’m good.”

“Okay then. Take care and have fun.”

“Yeah, I’m off.”

I opened the front door, dragging my suitcase behind me toward the car. My college-aged sister was there, loading some stuff into the trunk.

“What’re you doing?”

“Oh, I forgot to take out some bags from the other day. Just put that one in the back seat.”

“Got it.”

I lifted my suitcase into the back and set it at my feet. Instead of sitting there, though, I went around and got into the passenger seat. I like the passenger seat — the view’s better.

Right as I clicked my seatbelt, the driver’s door opened and my sister got in.

“Thanks for the ride.”

“Yup, no problem.”

She buckled up too and started fiddling with the navigation system. Guess she didn’t remember where my school was — fair enough, since she went to a different one.

The car started moving.

For some reason, I felt a little nervous.

The drive from our house to school takes about forty minutes. I usually go by bus or bike, but when I've got a lot of luggage or when it's pouring rain, she drives me.

There's a parking area for parents on campus too — perks of living in the countryside, I guess.

"By the way," my sister said as she waited for a pedestrian to cross, "you said none of your close friends are in your new class, right? You gonna be okay?"

So she had been worrying after all.

"Yeah… I got picked up by a group, so I'll be fine. None of them seem like bad people." Though, I added silently, some of them have pretty rough mouths and attitudes.

"Hmm," she murmured, then said, "Send me some pictures later."

"If I remember," I replied, looking out the window.

□□□

I took my luggage out of the car and shut the door, walking around to the driver's side. My sister rolled down the window and leaned out.

"Alright, have fun!"

"Thanks for the ride."

"Text me when you get there, okay?"

She said that, rolled the window back up, waved, and drove off. I waved back until her car disappeared from sight, then pulled out my phone.

There was a new message notification — probably from the group chat Hotta and the others had made just for this trip.

I tapped it open.

[Hotta]: "I'm here already. Where are you guys?"

Sent about ten minutes ago.

[Me]: "On my way to the schoolyard now."

After replying to Horita's message, I shoved my phone into my pocket, gripped the handle of my carry-on case, and started walking toward the schoolyard where everyone was supposed to meet.

"Hioki! Morning!"

Just a few steps later, someone called out from behind me—a familiar voice. Before I even turned around, a classmate came up beside me. It was Tsujitani, a guy from my middle school who's also in the same club as me in high school.

"Man, I was so worried I'd forget something that I couldn't sleep," he said.

"My mom kept asking if I'd forgotten anything too… but seriously, weren't you just too excited to sleep?"

"Haha! True that!"

His loud morning laugh was infectious, and I couldn't help but laugh too. Ah, it felt so calming—this sense of familiarity I hadn't felt in a while.

While I was enjoying the feeling, Tsujitani started saying, "My group's full of forgetful idiots, seriously—" but then suddenly switched topics as if remembering something.

"By the way, who's in your group?"

"Oh, that…"

I'd been expecting that question. I listed the names one by one.

"Whoa, I've barely talked to anyone besides Horita… Why that group?"

"Wish I knew myself…"

"So, Hioki finally joined the extrovert squad, huh?"

"No, no way."

He wiped at imaginary tears like he was crying, and I smacked him lightly on the shoulder with a "cut it out," earning a grinning "sorry" in return.

By the time we'd finished catching up, we'd already arrived at the

schoolyard. I wanted to keep talking, but then I remembered I'd already replied to Horita, so I said goodbye to Tsujitani there. Talking to an old friend again somehow gave me a small boost of energy.

As I looked around at the people slowly gathering, I started searching for Horita. Maybe the others were already there too. They'd be easy to spot with that kind of presence, I thought with a wry smile, but decided it'd be faster to just check my phone.

Before I could unlock it, a shadow fell over me.

"Morning."

"…Morning."

I looked up to see Watarai, who had greeted me, standing there with Nakazato, still looking half-asleep. I greeted them back.

"Horita and the others are over there," Nakazato said, his hands still in his pockets against the cold as he gestured with his chin.

I followed his gaze and spotted Horita and Morisaki near the flowerbed. So that's where they were.

"Let's go," Watarai said, starting to walk. Nakazato and I followed, falling into step beside him.

"I'm so bad at waking up in the morning," Nakazato mumbled, rubbing his eyes. "Think I'll manage?"

"As long as at least one person wakes up on time, you'll be fine," Watarai said, giving me a look that clearly said you're that person, making me sigh a little inside.

"No, I'm bad at mornings too."

"Even though you're in a sports club?"

"That doesn't make me a morning person."

Sure, I'm in a sports club—but that doesn't automatically mean I'm good at waking up early. When I said that, Nakazato and Watarai exchanged glances and made slightly troubled faces.

"What?" I asked, and apparently, Horita and Morisaki were also bad with mornings. So, five out of five members—not a single morning person among us.

“Well, it’s a school trip. We’ll be in a different environment, so someone’s bound to wake up early,” I said, throwing out some random logic. I gave them a look that said, makes sense, right? and they both nodded like, yeah, maybe.

When we reached Horita—who looked bright and excited like he couldn’t wait for the trip— and the still sleepy-looking Morisaki, Watarai immediately said, “Our group’s screwed in the mornings,” sharing our earlier conversation. The two of them gave us dead-eyed looks of pure hopelessness. Clearly, no one here had any motivation to fix the problem.

While I was half-listening to their pointless chatter, the sharp voice of the grade coordinator echoed across the yard.

“Everyone, gather up! Once your whole group’s together, the leader should report to your homeroom teacher! Class 1, Group 1, line up here!”

My ears rang. The guy was using a megaphone—he could at least lower his volume a bit.

After hearing the instructions, Nakazato handed his carry-on to Horita with a lazy sigh and trudged toward the teacher to report in. He was our leader; our group was number seven. While he was gone, the rest of us started lining up.

“I’ll just take the back,” I said, letting the others go first, but Watarai told me, “You should go in front—height order,” so I stepped ahead of him. We were only a few centimeters apart though.

The principal began with, “Today we’re blessed with clear skies…” and kept going. I listened seriously for the first minute, but soon got bored. I shifted my eyes away from him and glanced down at my watch. Only two or three minutes had passed. At least five more to go.

I thought, Morisaki’s probably on his phone by now, and out of boredom, I subtly glanced back. Sure enough, he was expertly tapping away at his screen without getting caught. How does he not get noticed?

As I turned back to face forward again, my eyes met Watarai’s. His expression said, What’s up?

Well, yeah—if someone suddenly turns around mid-speech, that’s suspicious. I couldn’t exactly say, Oh, I was just checking if Morisaki’s

on his phone, so I smiled awkwardly, shook my head, and faced forward again.

“What the hell was that…” I heard Watarai mutter behind me, but I pretended not to hear and focused on the principal, who was probably still only halfway through his speech.

Please don’t make this as long as a full school assembly, I thought, silently praying for it to end soon.

“Class 1, move to your buses!”

At the homeroom teacher’s call, the whole area suddenly burst into chatter and movement. Our group also broke formation and started talking.

“That was way too long! My legs hurt.”

“For real. I just wanna sit down already.”

Horita was whining, and Morisaki looked just as fed up. I was tired too and wanted to get on the bus right away—but since we were Class 5, we still had to wait a bit.

“So, what about the bus seats?”

“Oh, right. We know our bus number, but we haven’t decided who sits where.”

“We’re in the very back, right? Split three and two?”

“Let’s just do rock-paper-scissors for it, that’s easiest.”

The topic shifted to seating, which we hadn’t decided yet. To keep things fair, we agreed to settle it with a quick game. We formed a small circle and got ready to play when Morisaki suddenly went, “Ah —wait.”

Everyone looked at him, like what now?

“Someone’s gonna end up sitting next to a girl, right? I don’t want that.”

He said it with a clear look of discomfort.

Next to a girl, huh.

Our assigned seats were on the right side at the very back—three seats in the last row, and two in front of that. The girls' group was on the left side, with two seats in the last row and two in front. Meaning… one of us would have to sit next to a girl.

"Oh, come on, you're only realizing that now? That's why I said we should all sit in one row at the very back!"

"Yeah, but then we can't hear each other talk."

"Then just deal with it for once."

"Fine, then you sit next to the girl."

"What? Why me?"

At this point, I had no idea who was saying what—it had turned into a dumb back-and-forth argument that only close friends could have.

To be fair, sitting five in a row would make it hard to talk between the ends.

I hadn't said anything until now, just watching them argue, but it was clearly going nowhere. So I spoke up.

"I'll take that seat—the middle one in the back."

Even though everyone had been shouting over each other, my voice somehow cut through. The noise stopped instantly, and all four of them turned toward me with looks that said, Seriously?

I nodded, trying to make it clear the issue was settled.

"Then I'll sit next to Hiyoki," Watarai said out of nowhere.

I'd assumed we'd do rock-paper-scissors for the rest, but he volunteered instead. I glanced over at him.

Catching my look, Watarai tilted his head slightly and asked, "That okay?"

It didn't really matter to me who sat where, so I nodded.

"Then I'll take the window seat next to that," Horita said. "Guess that leaves me and Nakazato for the two seats in front," Morisaki added.

After Watarai spoke up, Morisaki and Horita quickly decided on their

seats as well. In the end, everything was settled through a bit of back-and-forth talk.

Just then, the teacher's voice rang out at the perfect time — "Class 5, move out!"

We handed our suitcases to the bus company staff, climbed aboard, put our backpacks on the overhead rack, and sat down.

As I took my seat, the girl sitting next to me shot me a sharp glance that basically said "Ugh, it's you?"

Sorry I'm not the good-looking one you were hoping for.

Feeling awkward, I shifted slightly toward Watarai.

But what was supposed to be "slightly" ended up being too much, and I bumped into him.

"Sorry," I murmured.

He seemed to get the situation and said, "You can lean on me if you want."

If you're that generous, maybe you could just switch seats with me instead… Of course, I didn't say that — I just replied, "Thanks," and left it at that.

After attendance was checked, the bus started moving. Honestly, I already kind of wanted to go home, but the trip had only just begun. With the bus this noisy, sleeping was impossible, even though I knew I'd pass out in seconds if I tried.

Out of curiosity, I glanced to my right to see what the others were talking about — they seemed to be getting hyped over some camera filter app.

For the record, phones were allowed on the trip as long as you used them appropriately — fine on the bus or during free time, but forbidden during morning assemblies and such. Which meant if Morisaki had been caught back then, his phone would've been confiscated.

Since phones were allowed now, I figured I might as well watch a video and reached for mine.

But before I could unlock it, someone on my right spoke up.

“Hey,” Watarai said.

I lowered my phone and looked at him. “What?”

“You know this one? The face-recognition app that tells you what kind of animal you look like.”

He pointed at his phone screen as he said it.

Animal diagnosis? What the heck is that?

“Never heard of it.”

“Try it out, Hiyoki.”

I shook my head, but Watarai switched to the front camera anyway and pulled me by the shoulder so that my face filled the frame.

Apparently, the others were interested too, since all three were watching.

As my face appeared on the screen, a graphic started spinning around my head, showing the names of different animals one after another.

Was I supposed to keep a straight face for this? Or smile?

In the end, I stayed expressionless for a few seconds — until the animation stopped and a word popped up on the screen, along with a cute animal icon: “Cat face.”

I read the words that appeared on the screen.

Watarai also leaned in to take a look.

“Hiyoki, you’re a cat face.”

“Ah… yeah, I kind of get that. Your eyes are a bit slanted.”

“When you smile, your eyes get narrower — that’s pretty cat-like too.”

“Your personality matches as well.”

They just kept saying “kinda, kinda.”

Am I supposed to be happy about that?

“What about you guys? What did you get?”

I asked out of curiosity, and they all shook their heads — apparently, I was the first one to try it.

“Okay! Next, Watarai,” Nakazato said, urging the one sitting next to me. Then, one by one, they each did the test.

The results were:

Watarai → Fox face

Morisaki → Wolf face

Nakazato → Deer face

Hotta → Dragon face

Apparently.

The only one that raised doubts was Hotta’s result — everyone thought he’d be a dog face.

“Isn’t this thing broken?”

“Hotta’s totally in the dog family.”

“Try again, this time with a smile.”

“Come on, appreciate my dignified looks already!”

Maybe he barked like that because nobody acknowledged him. I’ve never really looked closely at people’s faces, but if he kept quiet, I guess he’d be in the “actually handsome when silent” category. His features are pretty sharp, after all.

In the end, they decided to redo the test with smiling faces, just as Hotta suggested. We’d go in the same order as before, and I reached out to take Watarai’s phone. But as Watarai fiddled with the screen, he suddenly said, “Ah.”

“Wait, looks like this thing can recognize faces from normal photos too.”

Apparently, it could also analyze regular photos — meaning you could load a picture from your camera roll instead of taking one on the spot.

I thought, “Huh, that’s neat,” but the group decided to go with taking new smiling selfies anyway.

Since it was impossible for all five of us to fit into one shot given the seat arrangement, we split up — three in the back, two in the front.

Watarai stretched out his long arm to hold up the phone, and Morisaki and I leaned in from both sides to fit into the frame.

“A little closer,” he said.

We were already close enough, but maybe he was picky about the framing — he pulled me even closer by the shoulder.

It felt way too close, but since Morisaki beside us was about the same distance from him, I just went along with it.

“Okay, taking it.”

The screen flashed for a moment, and the photo was processed. The result was the same as before — the same animal names appeared. So it stays consistent, huh.

After checking our three results, Watarai fiddled with the screen a bit, then said, “Same as before,” and passed the phone to the two in front.

For some reason, his expression looked a little satisfied.

While waiting for their results, I asked something that had been on my mind.

“Hey, don’t people say ‘cheese’ anymore?”

“‘Cheese’? What’s that?”

What I meant was, Watarai hadn’t said “Say cheese” before taking the picture. When I explained that, both Watarai and Morisaki paused for a second to process — then burst out laughing.

“Oh, I forgot! I usually just snap it without any signal.”

“Wait, you’re one of those ‘cheese’ guys?”

I said, “Well, some people count down like ‘3, 2, 1,’ too,” and they laughed even harder. “Dude, that’s like a purikura booth thing!”

Their laughter was contagious, and I found myself laughing along with them.

“Hey, don’t leave us out of the fun,”

Nakazato said from the front, turning around and handing Watarai's phone back to him after finishing their own selfie test.

"Sorry, sorry," Watarai said, still chuckling as he took it.

"Anyway, turns out my smile got the Dog result!"

"See? Told you so."

"Hotta's totally a dog-type guy."

Hearing that, Watarai and Morisaki exchanged a knowing look. Hotta still seemed unconvinced, but when Nakazato changed the topic — "So, what were you guys laughing about?" — and heard the story, he burst out laughing too, his earlier grumpy face completely gone.

Yeah… when he smiles, he really is dog-like.

Before we knew it, the bus — lively as ever — arrived at the station. Apparently, our suitcases were being sent ahead to the inn, so having only our backpacks made us feel lighter both physically and mentally.

While waiting for the bullet train to arrive, Hotta muttered, "I'm starving," his gaze fixed on a shop selling bento boxes.

Checking the clock, it was already past 11:30.

We'd had something to drink, but since early morning, we hadn't really eaten anything. Now that he mentioned it, I could feel my stomach growling too.

"You'll get your bento on the train, so hang in there until then," a nearby teacher said, apparently overhearing us.

It was the homeroom teacher of Class 3 — still only two or three years into the job, young, and popular with students for being easy to talk to.

"What's on the menu?"

"Is there dessert?"

"By the way, is the train still not here yet?"

The usual scene: a bunch of high school boys pestering a teacher for fun. Hotta and the others bombarded him with questions about lunch and the schedule ahead, and while the teacher kept telling them,

“Check your itinerary,” he still answered their questions anyway.

I looked up at the electronic board above us.

Then an announcement came over the speakers.

Once the cleaning crew finished, we started boarding the bullet train one after another.

Checking the seat numbers on my ticket, we sat in the same 3-and-2 arrangement as on the bus.

This time, I got a window seat — which instantly lifted my mood.

“Hey, can I… leave this open?”

Maybe I’d left my vocabulary on the bus, but I pointed at the blind and asked Watarai next to me.

“You don’t have to ask, but sure — if it gets too bright, I’ll say something. Why, you like looking outside?”

“Yeah, I do.”

He paused, mid-motion as he was taking something out of his bag, turned toward me — and when I smiled and answered, he froze for a second before quickly mumbling, “…I see,” and looking away.

Since I’d gotten permission, I opened the blind all the way and leaned back in my seat, gazing out the window.

Rice fields and rows of houses blurred past faster than any car or train I’d ridden before. I couldn’t really explain why I liked looking outside — I just did.

“Got the bentos!”

Just as I was thinking that all the scenery was starting to look like nothing but forests and mountains,

Nakazato came back holding five boxed lunches in his arms.

“What kind of bento?”

“Not sure — looks like a mix of stuff.”

“Ah, a Bakumatsu bento then.”

"…You mean a Makunouchi bento, right?"

"Oh crap, you said it so seriously I didn't even notice."

"Don't go starting a shogunate on your own."

As everyone took their bentos from Nakazato, Hotta, who had poked his head forward, got roasted by the others.

We all exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

Still, now I kind of wanted to know what a "Bakumatsu bento" would taste like.

I unwrapped mine and looked inside.

Rice, fried white fish, simmered vegetables — yep, it was a classic Makunouchi bento. I tore open the little moist towelette and wiped my hands.

"I hate konnyaku — you want it, Watarai?"

"No tha— hey, don't just put it in my box!"

"I'll throw in a tomato too."

"Not helping."

Next to me, they'd started trading food.

Well, actually, it was more like Morisaki forcing his leftovers onto Watarai.

While the two of them were bickering, I took out my chopsticks and put my hands together. "Mmm, time to eat," I murmured, taking a bite of the rolled omelet. It was good. Unlike Morisaki's lunch, there wasn't anything I disliked, so I kept eating quickly. Partway through, Watarai handed me some carrots, saying he got too many from Morisaki. He probably didn't like them, but I didn't say anything and just took them.

Before I knew it, I'd finished eating, and when the homeroom teacher came by collecting empty lunch boxes, I dropped mine into the trash bag. Then I took a sip of water and let out a small breath.

Looking out the window, I noticed the scenery changing — still a lot of greenery, but buildings were starting to appear here and there. The

sky was completely clear, and the sunlight streaming in through the window was warm.

Ah… I'm getting sleepy.

If I fall asleep now, I'll be a mess in the morning. This group's already chaotic enough. Even though I told myself to stay awake, my eyelids were getting heavy. I tried to find something to focus on so I wouldn't nod off, but then Watarai noticed.

"Sleepy?" he asked.

I nodded honestly.

He smiled and said, "I'll wake you up when we get there, so you can sleep."

I wanted to say I'd stay awake, but honestly, I was too tired. "Thanks," I mumbled, adjusting my seat and closing my eyes.

Watarai and Morisaki kept talking about something, but their voices just turned into a pleasant background hum.

It didn't take long before I drifted off into sleep.

I felt my body being shaken, and my consciousness began to surface. Guess we'd arrived already.

I slowly opened my heavy eyelids, but everything was still hazy — even though I was awake, it felt like I was still half-dreaming.

"Hey, Hioki. C'mon, wake up,"

Watarai's voice reached me.

I blinked a few times to bring my blurry vision into focus. When I finally managed to see clearly, I looked at Watarai, who had woken me, and said in a slightly hoarse voice, "Thanks."

"I think I get now why you're not a morning person," he said. "Yeah, it's pretty bad, huh?"

The rest of the group, who had probably witnessed my entire struggle to wake up, gave me sympathetic looks. Horita and Nakazato turned back around to get ready to get off. They didn't really have to watch all that, though.

I took a sip from my water bottle to moisten my throat and looked out the window. The green scenery from before was gone — everything outside was now man-made and structured.

“Your hair’s messy,”

Watarai said once he saw I was fully awake, then reached over and smoothed down the back of my head.

Ah, I see. That’s probably the kind of thing that makes him popular. I touched the same spot he’d fixed and quietly thanked him.

When the shinkansen came to a stop, our homeroom teacher started giving directions, and everyone began filing out onto the platform.

I stood up and felt my body stiff and creaky, stretching a little. When I stretched, an involuntary “nnngh” sound escaped my throat, and I quickly covered my mouth in embarrassment.

Apparently, only Watarai, who was nearby, had heard. He turned around and said kindly, “It’s fine, I didn’t hear anything.”

Mortified, I adjusted my backpack and gave his back a light tap as we started walking.

It was June — early summer — but when we stepped outside the station, the cloudy sky and lack of sun made it a bit chilly.

It was already past 3 p.m., and from here, our plan was to watch a Noh performance and then head to the inn.

We got back on the bus.

Thinking about it, the first day was almost entirely spent traveling — kind of sad, considering it still counted as part of the school trip.

The next destination was about an hour away.

For some reason, the topic on the bus turned to Kansai dialect. Not just Kansai, but how dialects in general were kind of nice. Our hometown was rural, but not really known for strong dialects.

“What do you think ‘hokasu’ means?”

“To leave something alone?”

“To steam?”

“Nope — it means ‘to throw away,’”

Nakazato had looked it up and turned it into a quiz.

“No way, I’m totally gonna start using that.”

“You’ll forget it by tomorrow,” someone shot back.

Like little kids learning new words, we got excited over every strange Kansai term. We kept quizzing each other, and at some point, it turned into practicing how to haggle in dialect.

The bus ride to the Noh theater felt short — maybe because we’d already spent so much time traveling earlier.

We got off and entered the venue.

At the entrance, there were displays of costumes and props used in Noh plays. They looked heavy.

Thinking that, I followed the group inside.

The stage was L-shaped, not centered like I’d imagined. I had expected something like a gymnasium stage, so the layout surprised me a little. I pulled down the seat of a folding chair and sat.

Horita sat next to me — I was on the very edge, right near the stage. Not the main stage, but close to the curtain where the performers would enter.

Someone who seemed to be the theater’s manager came onstage to greet us and give a short explanation about Noh.

With a small laugh, he said, “It’ll be faster to just watch than to explain,” and then left the stage after another brief closing remark.

That kind of pace — yeah, our principal could really learn from that.

When the lights in the audience dimmed, the stage lights came on. From the curtain beside me, a few people carrying instruments stepped out. Once they took their positions, a mix of chanting voices and traditional instruments filled the air.

The sound of the Japanese instruments was surprisingly soothing.

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As the performance ended, applause filled the hall, and the lights came back on. The person who seemed to be the theater manager stepped onto the stage again, and the performers appeared from behind the curtains. He added more detailed explanations to what he had said in the beginning.

While he spoke, I jotted down a few key points in the notes section of my trip booklet. Horita noticed me writing and whispered, “You’re so serious,” to which I replied with a wry smile, “I just have a feeling they’ll make us write a report about this later.”

“Ah— true!” Horita said, sounding a bit panicked, but too lazy to take out his booklet now, so he asked, “Can I see your notes later?”

I nodded, thinking that when I do show him, I’ll make him treat me to something.

After the explanations ended, a few students chosen from each class took turns asking questions.

When the last one finished, the grade supervisor gave a short speech, and we all stood up and thanked the hosts before starting to leave our seats one by one.

Near the noisy entrance, I heard someone shouting from outside: “Hey, it’s raining!” So it finally started. I’d suspected the weather might turn bad. I tried to remember if I’d packed a folding umbrella in my backpack. Maybe running to the bus would be faster.

Thinking that, I changed my shoes.

Since standing around at the entrance would block others, I stepped out under the overhang to wait for Horita and the others.

I could hear the rain, but it was dark, so I couldn’t tell how heavy it was. Some people were already sprinting toward the buses, so maybe it was coming down pretty hard.

I took one step out from under the shelter to check—and that was my mistake.

Raindrops hit my face.

One struck me right in the eye. Ouch.

I quickly looked down and froze.

When I rubbed my eye, I had a bad feeling.

“My contact fell out.”

The small words I muttered to myself were drowned out by the rain. My eyesight’s terrible, but I wasn’t panicking—losing a contact isn’t the end of the world. The problem was, my glasses were in my suitcase… which had already been sent ahead to the inn.

I hadn’t expected to need them, so I packed them away. I was doomed.

When I opened my left eye, the world looked warped and uneven. Since my prescription is strong, the difference between one eye corrected and the other not is huge—it’s disorienting.

Honestly, I wanted to just take out the right one too, but then I wouldn’t be able to see anything at all.

The worst situation imaginable.

As I stood there silently despairing, Watarai called out to me. “What’s wrong? Were you moved or something?”

“No, my contact fell out.”

Maybe because he saw me rubbing my eyes, Watarai seemed to mistake it for crying and leaned in teasingly.

But I wasn’t in the mood to joke around right now.

The difference between my eyes was making me dizzy, and then one idea came to mind.

“Watarai, do you have an umbrella?”

“Yeah. You don’t?”

“Nope, so… can I share yours?”

“Sure.”

That was a lie. I actually had a perfectly good folding umbrella in my backpack. But for now, at least I wouldn’t get wet.

Next, I explained that the uneven vision was making me uncomfortable. Watarai, who apparently had perfect eyesight, tilted

his head with a puzzled look but nodded anyway.

“So, I kinda want to take the other contact out too.”

“If you do, you really can’t see anything?”

“Just blurry shapes, sort of… but it’s dark, so basically nothing.”

“I see.”

Alright, so he understood that part.

Now came the risky request — something that might sound weird.

“One more favor: while we’re walking, can I… hold onto something?”

“…Huh? What do you mean?”

That’s when I remembered — Watarai could be moody. Come to think of it, during our first introduction, he probably had the lowest impression of me.

Maybe I’d picked the wrong person to ask.

Still, I decided to explain and push through.

I told him that since I couldn’t really see what was ahead unless I got close, I might bump into things or miss where to stop at crosswalks.

So I asked if I could hold onto his backpack or maybe his sleeve while walking.

“…Got it. Sure.”

Was that a genuine “sure,” though?

His face gave nothing away.

When I said, “If you don’t want to, I can ask someone else,” he just opened the umbrella and said, “Come on,” as if he hadn’t heard me.

Fine by me if he was okay with it.

“Wait, I need to take out the other contact,” I said, stopping him. I carefully removed the right lens and wrapped both in a tissue.

Just then, Horita, Nakazato, and Morozaki came over with a big umbrella. Apparently, they’d gotten it from someone at the theater —

though I wasn't sure I believed that.

So that's why they took so long.

As I was fiddling with the tissue, Morozaki looked over and asked, "What are you doing?" Before I could answer, Watarai explained the whole situation for me.

He said his contact lenses came off because he cried from being so moved. Yeah, right. Completely different story. I sighed, stuffing the wrapped tissue into my pocket. It wasn't worth explaining, so I just said, "Sure," and stood next to Watarai. Once I was close enough, I could kind of make out their faces by focusing hard, squinting a little. They all looked like they were thinking, "What a pain." Probably.

"Let's move it already,"

our homeroom teacher urged, so we split into groups — Watarai and me, then Horita, Nakazato, and Morisaki — and started walking through the rain. It looked pretty cramped for the three of them under that big umbrella, but since I couldn't really see anything behind me anyway, I gave up trying to check.

The bus stop was across the street after a short walk. I held onto the strap of Watarai's backpack so I wouldn't lose him, carefully watching my step to avoid being a nuisance. But apparently, Watarai didn't like having his bag pulled on.

"This way's better,"

he said and took my hand instead.

If I were a girl, I probably would've fallen for him right there. The distance between us closed more than when I'd been holding onto his bag. I wondered if it wasn't awkward for him to walk like that, but it actually felt steadier — safer — so I didn't say anything.

When we stopped at the crosswalk, I half-expected the three behind us to start teasing, but they didn't say a thing.

Maybe their sense of personal space is just broken — like when they took that group selfie on the bus.

When we finally got on, Watarai didn't let go of my hand until we were both seated. Seriously, what a guy. Thanks, man.

I'm sure people were staring, wondering what was going on, but with my blurry vision, I couldn't tell — and honestly, I was grateful for that.

If I'd had clear sight, I probably would've died of embarrassment.

"Thanks. You really helped me out," I said.

"You're gonna need help even after we get to the inn, right? Kinda early to be thanking me," he replied.

"Oh… right. Still, thanks."

"Sure."

Apparently, he planned to look after me even once we got there. I hadn't thought that far ahead, so my reply came out all lazy and half-baked. Watarai chuckled at that and nodded, looking pleased.

The other three climbed on, and the bus started moving again. I couldn't see much, but from the bits of conversation — things like "Ugh, my clothes feel gross" or "Hope my backpack's okay" — it sounded like they'd all gotten soaked. Since I didn't hear Morisaki complaining, he was probably sitting in the middle, with Horita and Nakazato on either side.

With nothing to look at, I closed my eyes out of boredom. Then Watarai shook my shoulder, saying, "Don't fall asleep, it's a pain to wake you up."

"I'm just resting my eyes, I'm fine," I replied.

Seriously though, I wish he'd stop shaking me. If he bumped into the girl sitting to my left — the one whose opinion of me had already hit rock bottom — I'd be torn to pieces.

I grabbed the left hand he was shaking me with, squeezing it down as if to say stop that. I meant to let go right away, but Watarai squeezed back, so I just thought, well, whatever, and left it at that.

While talking with the others, he started absentmindedly rubbing my hand, intertwining our fingers, basically playing with it.

It tickled. I turned to glare at him, but his face was turned toward Nakazato, so I realized he wasn't even aware he was doing it.

Closing my eyes only made my other senses sharper, which felt weird,

so I opened them again and stared at the blurry interior of the bus.

Please, just let me put my glasses back on already.

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“Welcome, and thank you for coming,”

a graceful voice greeted us. But when I looked toward the source, I couldn’t make out her face at all.

Probably the hostess — and the staff lined up beside her — all looked like featureless silhouettes to me.

Even after we got off the bus, Watarai stayed beside me, still holding my hand, guiding me carefully all the way in.

Honestly, he’d been nothing but considerate. I was grateful beyond words.

Inside the large hall, the grade supervisor was explaining the schedule — dinner times, when the big bath would open, and so on.

The bath, huh… I’d completely forgotten to worry about that.

At home, I know the bathroom layout by heart, so even without seeing, I can manage fine. But here, it’s a completely new place — and not a private bath, but a public one. There’s no way I can ask someone to help me that much.

I imagined myself walking naked, wobbling along the wall for balance… Pathetic. Almost enough to make me cry.

Well, at least this time it’s bright, not like the dark street earlier. Maybe it’ll be fine.

“Come get your room keys~”

the teacher called out.

At that signal, the leaders of each group began to move. Nakazato came back, jingling the room keys in his hand.

“The room names are all flowers, apparently.”

“Flowers?”

“Yeah, ours is sunflower.”

“Sunflower…”

“Kinda reminds me of kindergarten.”

He said that while reading the name engraved on the keychain. He was right — it really did bring back kindergarten memories. Back then, my group was named after animals, though.

“Everyone’s got their keys? Then let’s head straight to the banquet hall~”

“Wait, what?”

Wait, hold on.

Aren’t we going to the rooms first?

Apparently, I had spaced out while thinking about the bath situation and completely missed the part where they said we’d go straight to dinner next. My poor eyesight was already annoying enough, so I squinted, trying to locate our homeroom teacher.

As expected — no luck. I couldn’t see a thing.

Then Watarai asked, “Should I go tell the teacher for you?” I nodded without thinking, and after confirming it, he walked off toward the teacher.

“Where’s Watarai going?”

Morozaki asked, watching his back as he headed that way.

I explained that he went to get permission for me to grab my glasses. Morozaki said, “Ah, got it,” and then called out to Nakazato.

After I explained the situation to both Nakazato and Horita, they nodded in understanding, and Nakazato handed me the room key.

What good guys.

Right then, Watarai came back, so we split up from the group and left the main hall together.

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We walked down a quiet hallway where soft background music played. Of course, our hands were still joined.

After being in noisy, crowded spaces all day, the sudden silence felt strange.

“Thanks for everything today,” I said, not wanting the silence between us to turn awkward.

“Don’t worry about it. I also…” Watarai trailed off. “…Actually, never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He shut his mouth before finishing the sentence.

When I said, “Now I’m curious,” he just went silent.

So that meant don’t ask any more, I guess.

I didn’t feel like forcing him to talk, so I changed the subject. “I wonder what we’re having for dinner.”

“Probably Japanese food,” he said, stopping his steps.

It seemed we’d arrived at our room.

The tag on the door said Sunflower.

Not that I could actually see it clearly, but Watarai inserted the key he was holding and opened the door with a click.

The faint scent of tatami drifted out.

At the entrance, Watarai stopped and said, “I’ll wait here.” I thanked him and tried to let go of his hand —

but he didn’t release it right away.

Just for a moment, he gave my hand a gentle squeeze, then reluctantly let go. What was that? Some kind of flirting technique?

Thinking that, I took off my shoes and stepped onto the tatami.

A bit further inside, I found five suitcases lined up.

Using the colors as a clue, I located mine.

Just in case, I double-checked the name tag, then opened it halfway. There wasn't time to open it completely, so I reached into the small pocket where I remembered my glasses case should be.

My fingers brushed against the familiar texture — found it. I pulled it out, opened the case, and put on my glasses.

Finally, a clear view of the world returned.

I let out a sigh of relief — but only for a second.

Then I quickly closed up the suitcase and headed back to where Watarai was waiting by the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I said, stepping forward to put on my shoes.

And then—

You know how tatami floors get slippery when you're wearing socks? Yeah. That.

The thought crossed my mind a second too late.

I stumbled forward with the momentum of my rush — the kind of "oh no" moment where you already know what's about to happen but can't stop it. If Watarai hadn't been there, I would've faceplanted right into the door, snapped my glasses, and probably started bleeding everywhere.

Since none of that happened and the pain was minimal, I quickly realized that Watarai had caught me in time.

Embarrassment hit me like a truck. I wanted to disappear. I might actually cry. (I won't, but still.)

"S-sorry, and… thanks."

I couldn't bring myself to look at him, so I just grabbed his arm for support and stood up. All I could manage was to stare down at the floor.

God, if you're listening, please erase me from existence. Actually, erase his memory too while you're at it.

While I was drowning in humiliation, Watarai suddenly cupped my cheek and tilted my head up.

Another romcom moment.

Please, no more. I'm full.

"You're not hurt, right?"

"Eh—ah, yeah, I'm fine, thank you," I blurted out in formal speech without thinking.

Watarai lightly rubbed my cheek, checking if I'd gotten any scratches. The only thing that hurt was the spot where my glasses had pressed into my nose, but other than that, I was fine.

Honestly, the bigger issue was that I'd hit my emotional limit — all I could do was stare at him helplessly.

Please forgive me for existing.

He blinked once, then chuckled softly. "Heh."

Releasing my face, he said, "Come on, let's go," and held the door open, waiting for me to put on my shoes.

Wait.

Did I… say that last part out loud?

Panicking internally, I rushed to tie my laces.

Once I stepped out, Watarai locked the door and started walking. I followed beside him.

"Um… can you just forget what happened back there?"

"Nope."

Instant answer.

So yeah, I definitely said it out loud.

Judging from his tone, I guess all I could do now was wait for the incident to fade into ancient history — or maybe bribe him during free time tomorrow. Though, considering how much he'd helped me today, I probably owed him at least three favors already.

Since there was no chance of wiping his memory, I just sighed and said, “Please go easy on me.”

He smiled. “Sure.”

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When we entered the main hall, it looked like a mix between a banquet and a traditional Japanese room — several round tables like at a wedding reception, each loaded with a variety of dishes buffet-style.

Just seeing the lazy Susans made me a little excited.

It seemed like the food had just finished being served, since no one had started eating yet; everyone was still chatting.

“Oh, good, you made it just in time. Nakazato’s group, your table’s over there,” someone said, pointing us toward our seats.

Our homeroom teacher noticed us and called out.

After thanking him — including for the help with my glasses — I headed toward the round table where Nakazato and the others were sitting.

When Nakazato spotted us, he smiled and waved.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said as I took my seat, and the three of them stared straight at my face.

“What?” I leaned back slightly. Though, since I was sitting, it didn’t really make a difference.

“You kinda give off a different vibe now.”

“You look younger.”

“You look like someone who’d get mugged.”

That’s a pretty harsh set of comments.

Do I really look that weird?

“Yeah, sure,” I muttered, frowning.

“Ah, no, that’s not what we meant! Sorry! I meant it like—you look

cute.” Nakazato quickly tried to cover for it.

Even being called cute, I didn’t know how to react.

Was I supposed to just say thanks?

Hotta nodded in agreement, and even Morisaki — the one who said I looked like I’d get mugged — nodded too. Yeah, that one was definitely sincere.

The conversation shifted from my glasses to the rotating table, and we started spinning it a little, playing around, when suddenly the voice of the grade coordinator echoed through the microphone.

“Alright everyone, great work on your first day of the school trip! I know you’re tired from all the traveling, but enjoy the food and let’s do our best tomorrow too! Now, put your hands together— Itadakimasu!”

The room filled with the chorus of “Itadakimasu,” followed by the clattering of dishes and lively chatter.

“Hey, let’s do a toast.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“Let’s do it.”

“What should we drink?”

Holding his cup in hand, Hotta made a suggestion.

Since none of us had poured our drinks yet, we picked from the bottles of cola, orange juice, and oolong tea placed on the round table.

Hotta chose cola, Nakazato and Morisaki poured orange juice.

Watarai, sitting next to me, opened the oolong tea bottle and started pouring. “I’ll have that too,” I said, reaching to take the bottle when he paused mid-pour and said, “Pass me your cup.”

I handed it to him.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Mm,” he replied softly as he poured the tea into my cup.

Once everyone was ready, Hotta, who had made the suggestion, asked, “Everyone good?”

“Wait,” Morisaki said, holding up her phone — apparently she was going to record a video. When she nodded and said, “Okay,” Hotta shouted cheerfully, “Kanpai~!”

We all followed, clinking our cups together with a clear clink. It kinda felt like a drinking party. Not that I’d ever actually been to one.

As I sipped my oolong tea, Watarai and Nakazato asked Morisaki, “Send us that video.”

“Yeah, I’ll drop it in the group,” she said, fiddling with her phone before tucking it into her pocket.

“Thanks,” the two replied, and then everyone went back to eating.

“It’s probably for her story,” Hotta, sitting beside me, explained when he noticed me staring blankly at their exchange.

“Like a daylog clip.”

I guess my face made it obvious I was wondering what they were doing.

“Oh, that’s pretty trendy,” I said.

“Wait, Hiyoki, you don’t have Daylog? Give me your account.”

“I wanna know too.”

“Me too! Send us your QR code.”

Hearing Hotta and me talk, Watarai and the others pulled out their phones too, asking for my handle.

“I don’t have one,” I said. “I don’t use Daylog.”

The four of them froze for a moment, then gave me a look like I’d just said something unbelievable.

There must be other high schoolers who don’t use Daylog. Like me.

“Then let’s make you an account when we get back to the room,” Watarai suggested. The other three chimed in with, “Yeah, good idea!”

It sounded annoying to argue, so I just nodded. “Sure. So what do you guys usually post?”

While eating or moving dishes around, everyone went, “Hmm…” trying to think of how to answer.

Then Morisaki spoke up first.

“Stuff like that toast video just now, or selfies we took on the bus,” Morisaki said. “Or when we go on trips — times like this are perfect for taking tons of pictures,” Hotta added.

“It doesn’t have to be just people, either,” Watarai said. “You said you like outdoor scenery, right, Hiyoki?”

They each told me what kind of things they usually post. I could easily imagine their feeds being full of bright, shiny moments. When Watarai mentioned landscape photos, I thought that actually sounded pretty fun — something I might even enjoy posting myself.

Boys’ appetites are no joke — before long, nearly all the food on the round table had disappeared into our stomachs.

Finally, dessert was served — slices of melon.

I stuck my fork into one and popped it into my mouth, piece after piece. Guess I’m one of those “there’s always room for dessert” types. Nakazato said, “Ugh, I’m full already,” and left half his portion, so I gladly took it.

When we’d finished dessert, I sipped the last of my oolong tea as the grade head took the mic and stepped forward.

“Has everyone finished eating? As I mentioned when we arrived, next up we’ll split into class groups for the bath time rotation. Please make sure you don’t mix up your time slots! Alright then… gochisousama deshita!”

“Gochisousama deshita~!” we all echoed together.

After putting our hands together to close the meal, students began standing up one after another.

Since there were no instructions like “Class 1 first,” the exit quickly got crowded. “Let’s wait till it clears up,” Nakazato suggested.

I leaned back in my chair, letting the fullness sink in.

Maybe I'd eaten too much — but it was so good I didn't really mind.

While we sat waiting for the crowd to thin, people passing by called out to the four of them.

"Hey, Nakazato, you guys still here?"

"Hotta, where're you going for tomorrow's free time?"

"Morisaki, I saw your story — your group looks like you're having a blast!"

"Watarai, which room are you in? Can we come hang out?"

Watching all these people — guys and girls alike — come up to talk to them made me feel like slipping away to the room early.

I quietly pulled my chair back to put a little distance between us.

Just then, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I looked up and saw Tsujitani and Ino standing there.

Ino's from the same middle school as me — we were in the same club, too.

"Yo! How're you feeling?"

"Still getting bossed around?"

"Hey, don't talk like I'm someone's lackey," I shot back.

I lightly hit Ino on the stomach and said, "What the hell, man."

"Classic Kansai energy," Tsujitani laughed, while Ino held his belly and said, "Dude, I just ate—don't hit me right now," laughing anyway.

Then I remembered to tell them about losing my contacts in the rain. They both laughed, saying, "So that's why you're wearing glasses now." Tsujitani patted my head, saying, "Rough day, huh?" like he was comforting me, and Ino joined in, ruffling my hair even harder.

I wished they'd stop — my glasses were about to fall off.

"Oh crap, I'm in Class 1, gotta go get ready for bath time."

"Same, my group already went ahead. See you later!"

They waved and said, “Tell us all about it back at club,” before jogging off toward the exit. I waved back at their shrinking figures, then turned to see Nakazato and the others also standing up to leave after finishing their own conversations. As I fixed my messed-up hair, I got up too.

When we started walking, Watarai came up beside me and asked, “Who were those guys?”

“Friends from club,” I answered.

“…Huh,” he murmured, and then started ruffling the back of my head. Guess my hair was still messy.

He sounded kind of moody, though.

While I wondered about that, I grabbed my backpack from the hall and headed toward the room with the others.

When we got to the door, Nakazato inserted the key but turned it the wrong way, jiggling it noisily.

“You suck at that,” Morisaki teased.

“Shut up!” Nakazato barked just as the lock clicked and the door opened.

As I was about to step inside last, I happened to glance at the wooden nameplate by the door. The word “Himawari” (Sunflower) was carved there, with a little sunflower engraved beneath it.

“Cute,” I murmured, and walked in.

After locking the door, I bent down to untie my shoelaces — and suddenly got hit with a flashback of earlier, when I went back for my glasses. The absolute number-one thing I didn’t want to remember right now. I sat down, pretending to struggle with my laces just in case anyone was watching, waiting for the heat in my face to fade.

Everyone started unpacking their luggage.

I decided to do the same — anything to avoid thinking about Watarai. When I finished unpacking, I started writing down my thoughts about the day in the trip journal.

“Hey, Hiyoki,” Morisaki called from the veranda chair, lazily swinging his phone. “Your account,” he said.

Oh, right — we'd promised to make a daylog account earlier. I'd completely forgotten.

"I'll do it once I finish this," I said, and filled the last two lines of my journal. Eighty percent full — good enough.

I put my pen case and the journal away, then pulled out my phone. As soon as I did, the four of them crowded around me. I unlocked my screen and started downloading the daylog app.

"You really didn't even have it installed?" Morisaki said in disbelief, but I ignored him.

Once the app finished downloading, I tapped the icon. A clean, pretty interface popped up: Let's make an account! I hit Create new, typed my email and password so the others couldn't see, then pressed Confirm.

"All done," I said, showing the screen to them.

"Show us your QR code," Morisaki said.

I had no idea how to do that, so I looked up for help and met Nakazato's eyes. He smiled and said, "Here, give it to me," then quickly pulled up the QR code for me.

"Keep it on that screen," he said, handing my phone back. Everyone held up their phones one by one, scanning my code. "Okay, you can close it now," Nakazato said, so I exited the screen.

My new account page appeared — no profile picture, no name, totally blank. I noticed a little "4" under followers and a notification mark. Opening the followers list, I saw all four of their accounts, so I followed them back.

Out of curiosity, I tapped on Watarai's profile.

Followers: 12,000.

What the hell?! That's insane.

I checked the others too:

Hotta — 5,000 followers.

Nakazato — 8,000.

Morisaki — 15,000.

My head hurt.

Their posts were exactly what they'd said earlier — pictures with friends, food, scenery. Each post had hundreds or thousands of likes.

"You guys are basically celebrities."

"Nah," Nakazato laughed. "There are plenty of regular people with that many."

"Post some stuff too, Hiyoki. You'll get followers," Hotta said. "Nah, I'm fine just seeing yours."

Actually… why did I even make this again?

I closed my phone and set it down on the table.

Right at that moment, there was a knock on the door — kon kon. The sudden sound made me jolt.

Hotta stood up and went to open it.

I heard a few words exchanged, then he came back.

"Our class's turn for the bath," he said, pointing toward what I assumed was the bathhouse. So the knock was from a student in the class before us.

We grabbed our change of clothes and left the room, heading down the hall toward the big bath.

We passed students in gym clothes along the way — apparently pajamas were supposed to be the school tracksuit, so it was easy to tell who was from our school. The yukata we saw in the rooms weren't allowed.

We ducked under the curtain for the men's bath and stepped into the changing room. Everyone tossed their clothes into the baskets and started undressing. I took off my glasses and was just about to pull off my undershirt when Watarai spoke. "Hiyoki, you good with the bath?"

The way he said it, it almost sounded like I hated baths. I knew what he actually meant — whether I'd be okay with my blurry vision — so I mentally corrected it and answered, "Yeah, I'll be fine."

“Don’t trip.”

“…I’ll try my best,” I said.

I pulled my head out of the half-removed undershirt and put it into the basket. Even though we’re all guys, being naked in front of others still makes me uncomfortable. It’s not that I’m skinny or insecure about my body — it’s just embarrassing, plain and simple. I quickly took off the rest of my clothes, grabbed my towel, and stepped into the bath area.

Sitting on a stool, I turned the shower handle to wash my hair. After checking that the water was at a good temperature, I squeezed some shampoo into my hand, lathered it up, and glanced around. Not that I could see much anyway.

The public bath was bigger than I expected — almost like a hot spring. I scrubbed my head, massaging the shampoo into my scalp. I must’ve used too much, because the foam was about to get into my eyes. I reached out blindly to adjust the water, but I must’ve turned the handle the wrong way — a burst of cold water splashed over me.

“Uwah,” I yelped, jerking my stool backward with a loud clatter. The guy next to me said, “What are you doing?”

Judging by the voice, it was Morisaki.

“Can you switch this to hot water?”

I asked blindly, unable to open my eyes. I heard the squeaking sound of the handle turning, and soon the warmth returned.

“That’s why I asked if you were okay earlier,” came Watarai’s voice from the other side. Grateful for the rescue, I rinsed off the foam and hooked the showerhead back. Honestly, turning the wrong way wasn’t a vision issue — I just messed up. After wiping the water from my face and catching my breath, I thanked both Watarai and Morisaki. They only looked like vague human shapes to me. Sorry if I got the wrong people.

“It’s fine,” Watarai said. “Oh, and wait for me when you’re done.” He started washing his hair and body. I was about to decline, knowing he’d probably want to guide me again, but he added, “Seriously, I’d be in trouble if you slipped.” Since I couldn’t guarantee I wouldn’t, I shut up and grabbed the conditioner.

Once I finished washing and waited, I heard a voice say, “Sorry to keep you.” Through the blurry view, I saw a hand reaching out. I grabbed it, and Watarai began walking. “Looks like I’m babysitting,” Morisaki teased from the side, but all I could do was follow — it was better than wobbling alone and holding onto walls.

When we got close enough, I could finally make out the marble-like edge of the bathtub. “Thanks, you can let go now,” I said.

As soon as he released my hand, I dipped my legs into the water and sank in.

It was a little hot but felt amazing. A splash came from next to me — probably Hotta and Nakazato.

“Hey, Hiyoki, how do you handle swimming classes?” Hotta asked. “Yeah, good question,” someone else said.

Looking toward the vaguely human shape I assumed was Hotta, I answered, “Ah, back in middle school my eyesight was better, so I could still manage alone. I don’t go to pools in my free time, though.”

“Yeah, high school doesn’t have pool classes,” one said. “What about the ocean?”

“I go to the beach, but I don’t swim.”

“Lucky. I wanna go to the beach too.”

“Summer’s coming — let’s plan it.”

“Think we can go just for a day?”

“Let’s stay overnight.”

They were already making plans for a beach trip. At first, I thought it was just among the four of them, but then someone said, “Hiyoki, you bring the sparklers,” so I guess I was included too.

I was surprised — I’d thought things would go back to normal after the school trip.

As I was lost in memories, thinking how long it had been since I’d gone to the sea, a voice suddenly asked, “You boys high schoolers?”

It was an older man’s voice — probably another guest staying here. Our school hadn’t rented out the whole inn, so of course there were

other people around.

“Yes, we’re here for our school trip.”

“Ha! You boys eat well? Where y’all from?”

He laughed heartily and slapped my shoulder. It kind of hurt.

The four of them, probably not wanting to deal with the man, replied half-heartedly with things like “Yeah, that’s right,” and “We’re having fun.” I nodded along too, just trying to get through it — and then, suddenly, it happened.

“You gotta eat properly and build some muscle, boy! You’re so skinny and scrawny, how’re you gonna protect a girl like that?”

“Uh…”

As he said “scrawny,” the old man suddenly poked at my stomach. I jolted in surprise — I’d already thought he was a bit too touchy earlier, but this was way too much.

And what the hell did he mean by “scrawny”?

Then his hand accidentally brushed against my side, and a quiet “nn —” sound slipped from my mouth before I could stop it.

I hurriedly covered my mouth, but it was too late.

Stop it! This kind of thing just kills the mood completely!

I couldn’t see their faces clearly, so I had no idea how the other four reacted — that at least spared me some embarrassment.

But I knew it would be awkward once we got back to the room. Nothing was going right for me today.

“Oh! My bad, my bad! That tickled, huh?”

The man laughed loudly again, giving me another hearty slap on the shoulder. Apparently, he didn’t mean anything by it.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, trying to shift my body away to put some distance between us. But before I could move, someone grabbed my arm.

“Well, we should be going now. Excuse us,” Watarai said politely.

“Alright then! Have fun!” the man replied.

Still holding my arm, Watarai stood up from the bath and headed toward the dressing room. The other three followed, saying “Thanks, sir,” as they splashed out of the water. I bowed my head slightly toward where the man was, still being pulled along. I actually wanted to stay in the bath longer…

In the dressing room, we quickly toweled off and put on our underwear and gym clothes.

“You okay?”

While I was drying my hair, Watarai — already dressed — asked from beside me. He was probably talking about what just happened. Remembering it made my face heat up a little.

“Didn’t expect to get harassed,” I muttered.

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“I’m not that scrawny anyway.”

“Oh, that’s your takeaway?”

That was a lie.

I just wanted to lighten the mood, so I joked about it.

I stopped wiping my hair and went over to the counter with the hair dryers. I focused on drying my hair in silence.

Hotta tapped my shoulder, saying they were heading out first, and I nodded, turning the dryer back on.

Maybe I’d zoned out too much trying not to think about anything. When I turned the dryer off, my hair was completely dry. I brushed through it with my fingers, then quickly applied some toner and moisturizer before grabbing my things and leaving the bath area.

I didn’t want to put my glasses back on right after applying moisturizer, but since I didn’t want another accident, I held them slightly away from my face as I walked. On the way to the room, a teacher stopped me and asked, “Has all of Class 5 finished up?” I just answered, “Yes,” on instinct — honestly, I had no idea since the dressing room had been mixed with Class 6 students.

When I reached my room, I grabbed the doorknob and was about to step inside when someone called from behind me.

“Hiyoki-kun.”

I turned around and looked down a little — two girls were standing there. They were the same ones who had talked to me when we were forming our free activity groups.

Both wore masks, probably not wanting to show their faces without makeup.

“What is it?” I asked.

They fidgeted for a bit, not saying anything.

Just as I thought about going into the room, one of them finally spoke up.

“Why were you holding hands with Watarai-kun today?”

“…Huh?”

“I mean, you were holding hands! On the bus, and right after we got to the inn too…”

Her voice trailed off, growing quieter and quieter, and I muttered, “Ah… that.”

“I’ve got bad eyesight. He was just helping me out.”

“But—but you were holding hands the whole time on the bus! He wasn’t helping you then, right?”

“I wouldn’t know. Maybe Watarai just felt like it.”

“Is he like that with everyone?”

“Even with Morozaki-kun?”

“I don’t know. Those two are both kinda touchy with people, I guess. And even if he was holding someone else’s hand, I wouldn’t really be paying attention.”

I started talking faster, wanting to end the conversation as soon as possible. Please, just let me go already.

The two girls exchanged glances, then said “Hmm,” and added brightly, “I see! Sorry for suddenly asking! Let’s have fun tomorrow, okay?” They waved and hurried back to their room.

Girls in love really go through a lot, I thought, as I grabbed the doorknob and went inside.

“You’re late. Something happen again?”

“Nah, just ran into some friends and talked for a bit.”

When I came in, Watarai looked at me with a slightly puzzled expression. I decided not to mention the conversation with the girls.

Feeling completely drained, I tossed my stuff next to my suitcase, grabbed my toothbrush, and headed to the sink.

The shako-shako sound of brushing filled the quiet bathroom. It had been a chaotic first day, but I had a bad feeling tomorrow would be even harder.

After rinsing my mouth and putting my toothbrush away, I turned to leave — and bumped into Morozaki.

“Ow,” I said, rubbing my nose. He pushed me gently back toward the sink. “What?” I glared up at him — he’s a bit taller than me.

“This is where you take pictures, right?”

“Pictures?”

“For daylog.”

He raised his phone toward the mirror. “I’m taking one,” he said, so I instinctively flashed a peace sign toward the mirror.

Wow, that light’s really bright though.

There wasn’t even a shutter sound, so I kept holding the pose until he said, “It’s done.” Then say that earlier, man.

I tried to leave the sink again, but Morozaki stopped me once more. What now? He called out to the other three, and soon all five of us were crammed into the tiny bathroom — way too crowded.

“Step out for a sec. Line up by height,” Morozaki instructed. Apparently, he had a specific idea for the photo.

From the back it went: Morozaki, Watarai, Hotta, me, and Nakazato. It was based on our April height check, so maybe things had changed since then — whatever.

“I’m taking it,” he said again. I reflexively did another peace sign. The others just tilted their bodies or turned their faces slightly — they looked like actual models, while I felt like some random fan taking a picture with celebrities.

Once again, I couldn’t tell when it ended and just froze in a smiling peace-sign pose until Nakazato laughed and said, “It’s already done.”

If you’re done, say it!

“How do you even know when it’s finished?” I asked. “Hmm… I just feel it?”

Completely unhelpful answer.

When Morozaki finally said, “We’re good,” we all shuffled out of the bathroom. The room felt noticeably cooler — makes sense, since cramming five guys in that tiny space was way too hot.

When I was about to put my toothbrush case away, someone grabbed my arm and stopped me.

I think I finally understood what that kind of touch feels like. When I turned around, Watarai was holding up his phone and said, “I wanna take a picture with you too.”

So I ended up going back into the washroom again.

Unlike Morozaki, he used the front camera instead of the back one. “The lighting’s best in the washroom,” he said, though I didn’t really get what he meant. Like… power or something?

Watarai put an arm around my shoulder and moved closer, trying to find the best position for the frame.

I only have one kind of pose, so I just made a peace sign and waited. Right as he said “I’m taking it,” the screen flashed for a moment. With the front camera, it’s easier to tell when the shot’s taken, I thought—but then he asked if we could take a few more.

He showed me some poses: just tilt my head without the peace sign, wink with one eye closed, take off my glasses—stuff like that.

After a bunch of photos, he checked them on his phone. “Can I go back now?” I asked.

He lowered the hand he had over his mouth and said, “Yeah, thanks.”

Back in the tatami room, the futons were already laid out— three on the left, two on the right, all with our heads facing the middle. “Oh, you guys laid them out? Thanks.”

“No problem,” said Hotta, who was fiddling with his phone at the far end of the three-person side.

Finally, I put my toothbrush case away and flopped backward onto one of the futons on the two-person side.

I kind of picked my spot without asking, but oh well.

Man, I’m exhausted.

I thought I wouldn’t be able to sleep since I already dozed off on the bullet train, but looks like that won’t be a problem.

Feeling myself drift off, I took off my glasses and left them by the pillow, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep yet. I still wanna talk more,” said Nakazato, poking my cheek. “Mm… about what?”

“Come on, it’s a school trip—time for love talk!”

So that’s what this is about.

I rolled over to look for him, put my glasses back on,

and saw that instead of being beside me, Nakazato had taken the middle spot on the three-person side.

Hotta put down his phone and asked, “Hiyoki, do you have a girlfriend?” Watarai and Morozaki, clearly interested, came over to our futons too.

“Ah, sorry to disappoint, but no.”

“Wait, didn’t you have one back in middle school?”

“That’s probably a misunderstanding.”

“Huh? You and Hotta went to the same middle school?” said Watarai, surprised. Guess he didn’t know—not that I’d ever mentioned it.

“Yeah,” Hotta replied. “We were never in the same class, though.”

“There were only two classes, so that’s kinda a miracle,” I said with a laugh. “So what was that misunderstanding about?” asked Morozaki, circling back to the topic.

I started digging through my middle school memories.

“When I was listening to a close friend’s problems, someone misunderstood and spread a rumor that we were dating,” I explained.

“Ah, that happens a lot,” one of them said.

“So how did you clear up the misunderstanding?”

“I didn’t really ‘clear it up.’ The girl I was helping ended up getting together with the person she actually liked, so we stopped hanging out after that. Everyone probably just assumed we drifted apart naturally.”

“Oh, really? I actually thought you two just faded out until now.”

“Wow, so you were kind of a famous fake couple?”

“Nah, it was just that the person who spread the rumor made it blow up on its own.”

I shrugged and said, “Anyway, my turn’s over. What about you guys—none of you have girlfriends right now?”

They all answered that they had been in relationships before, but were single now.

“Out of everyone’s exes, Morozaki’s situation was the wildest,” Nakazato said. “Yeah, I was honestly shocked when I heard about it,” Hotta added. “Oh? Now I’m curious,” I said, looking over.

Morozaki made a face like he wanted nothing to do with the conversation. “I don’t wanna talk about it,” he muttered.

“If you won’t, I will,” Nakazato said with a grin, leaning forward.

“See, he only just broke up recently, but Morozaki was dating an older woman. I think she was a second-year in college? They met through

DMs on Daylog…” Nakazato started telling the story with way too much enthusiasm. To sum it up, it sounded like he’d gotten caught up with a super clingy, mentally unstable girl.

Apparently, she sent him constant messages, forbade him from talking to other girls, even controlled when he could go out—it really messed him up. I started to understand why Morozaki seemed to have such a dislike for girls.

“Now that I think about it, her pictures were totally filtered, too,” he grumbled. “So, uh… how did you even break up with her?”

“My brother’s friend handled it,” he said flatly.

Handled it? That sounded sketchy as hell.

Maybe I should ask to switch groups while I still can.

Seeing my expression, Nakazato laughed and said, “No, no, not like that.”

“Morozaki’s brother has this friend who looks really intimidating, so they just pretended he was some dangerous guy and arranged the breakup through him.”

“She was bawling her eyes out,” Hotta added.

“I don’t know if I should feel sorry for her or what… but sounds rough.”

“Yeah, I’m just glad it’s over,” Morozaki said, collapsing onto his futon. Then he turned his head toward us and added,

“If we’re talking about being intense, Watarai’s just as bad.”

“His ex?” I asked.

“No, him.”

“Really now?”

When I looked over at Watarai, he just shrugged. “I’m normal.”

“He’s not heavy, exactly,” Nakazato said. “More like… super jealous.”

“His ex said he’s so composed that it’s kinda scary,” Hotta added quietly.

The two of them started whispering without really lowering their voices, and from the way they talked, it sounded like Watarai's the type who likes to take care of everything for the person he's with.

Come to think of it, there had been signs of that.

I'd always just thought he was the helpful kind.

"There was also this review from some teen girl saying, 'He makes you misunderstand on purpose.'"

"Don't talk about me like I'm a product review."

Nakazato said it jokingly, but apparently it was true.

And yeah… I could kind of see why someone would say that.

"My story's over," Watarai said, glancing at Nakazato and Hotta. "Your turn."

"What? That's way too short," they protested, but he clearly didn't want to talk more.

"Hotta, you got confessed to at Dreamland, right?"

"Yeah. Totally caught me off guard."

It sounded like one of those romantic stories.

Prompted by Nakazato, Hotta started talking.

"We were hanging out in a mixed group, like six of us. At the end of the day, after the parade, when the closing song started playing, she called me over somewhere a bit away from the others and confessed."

"Oh yeah, I've heard there's some rumor—if you confess at a certain spot in Dreamland, your love will come true."

"That's dumb," Morozaki muttered.

Fairy tale romance wasn't really his thing.

"Well, I was kinda caught up in the mood, so I said yes," Hotta continued. I could understand that—theme parks have that kind of magic. Maybe that rumor had some truth to it after all.

"But…" Hotta went on, "I don't know if it's because she thought she

was a princess or what, but she always wanted to go to super cutesy cafés, and she was way too clingy. So I broke up with her."

"Yeah… you need someone whose tastes match yours," I said. "And the worst part is, you only found that out after you started dating. That sucks," Nakazato added.

Just imagining it gave me goosebumps.

Hotta buried his face in his pillow and groaned, "Never again," so I reached over and patted his head.

When Hotta's story ended, all four of us turned to Nakazato. Personally, I figured he was the most likely to have a crazy story. He noticed our stares, snorted, and began.

"I was dating my childhood friend."

Oh. Surprisingly normal.

Just when I thought it was anticlimactic, he said—

"She cheated on me."

…What?

He really went through something that dramatic in high school? Guess my instincts were right—he was the ticking time bomb. Apparently, the guy she cheated with was her college tutor. Seriously, that's straight out of a drama.

"I should've known," he said. "She suddenly stopped letting me come to her room, started hiding her phone… all that."

"How did you find out?"

"She broke down crying one day and confessed."

"That's hell."

Is this what "love talk" is supposed to be?

I always imagined it being a lot more lighthearted and giggly than this.

Anyway, before the three of them sank deeper into emotional damage, I tried to steer the topic elsewhere.

“Uh, okay, then… what’s everyone’s type?”

Maybe I should’ve picked something completely different, but at least this way, no one gets hurt.

They started taking turns answering again, one by one. Looked like this school trip night talk wasn’t ending anytime soon.

□□□

The voices around me began to fade—

or maybe it was just because I was drifting off.

As I listened, my head started nodding, my words grew shorter. I barely spoke anymore, just muttered “yeah” or “mm” when someone said something. My glasses were already off, left by the pillow.

“So, Hioki, what kind of girls do you like?”

“….”

“Huh? Did he fall asleep?”

“Hioki, you sleepy?”

“…mm.”

“Man, you sure sleep a lot. You even passed out on the bullet train.”

“…mm.”

“He’s only saying ‘mm’ now.”

Someone kept trying to talk to me,

but my body was too heavy to even open my mouth.

In my mind, I quietly murmured good night—

and then my consciousness slipped away.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The novel is pretty big! Please leave comments to keep me motivated and don't forget to

follow my socials

I think a normal person would've screamed if they saw this. Through the small gap of the slightly open shoji window, morning sunlight streamed in. But that single ray didn't shine on anyone — it stretched straight toward the wall.

A refreshing morning calls for a refreshing song.

But what kind of song feels "refreshing" depends on the person. For some, it's a calm classical piece; for others, it's the lively sound of a brass band. More isn't always better. Playing several "refreshing" songs at the same time doesn't make it more refreshing — it just turns into pure dissonance.

Everything in the world has compatibility — whether it's between objects or between people. A sunflower, dressed in bright yellow petals, turns upward toward the sun as if guided by its light. A shadow falls on the wooden name tag that says "Sunflower." The door slides open with a clatter.

But beyond the door, there was no student greeting the morning with a bright, sunflower-like smile.

Anyone who saw it would probably call the police.

What unfolded there was a scene straight out of hell — the complete opposite of a refreshing morning.

In the dim room, multiple alarm clocks were blaring. Not just one — five. Each with a different sound and volume, overlapping into a terrifying symphony. Honestly, it was scarier than a horror game soundtrack.

Even scarier were the five figures lying on the floor.

Not a single one moved — not even a finger.

They weren't just "sleeping." It was closer to "dead."

If this were a crime drama, they'd win the Best Acting Award for playing corpses.

"Hi—"

"Himawariiiiiiiiiiii!!"

Unable to endure it any longer, the grade supervisor shouted. The sun had only just begun to rise, but his voice easily overpowered every alarm in the room.

□□□

The noise was so intense that my consciousness began to resurface. Morning, huh. Yeah… probably morning.

Even though my brain understood that, my body felt like lead and wouldn't move.

I didn't want to leave the dream yet.

I clung to whatever was in front of me.

Just a little longer. Two more hours of sleep, please.

But the sounds around me grew clearer — voices calling names, footsteps, things clattering. What's going on? An incident?

"Hiyoki! Hiyoki, wake up!"

Apparently, I was one of the names being called.

Someone was shaking me lightly, tapping my body.

Finally, I forced my heavy eyelids open.

The bright light made me squint hard and wrinkle my forehead.

For a few seconds I frowned, blinking away the blur from my vision. Sitting up, I groped around for my glasses.

Someone must have picked them up — they placed them in my hand.

My view instantly cleared.

“You’re up? Morning.”

When I turned toward the voice, Watarai was there, smiling softly. The sunlight streaming through the open shoji behind him made the whole scene almost too bright.

I squinted and replied, “Morning.”

“Hiyoki! Morning! You’re late!”

“Eh—ah, good morning. I’m sorry.”

A loud voice called out from behind me, startling me. When I turned around, the grade supervisor was standing there. For a moment I couldn’t process what was happening, but I quickly bowed, greeting and apologizing at once.

Still half-asleep, I decided to wash my face to wake up properly. As I passed by the teachers struggling to wake up Nakazato and Morozaki — with Horita trying to help — I quietly headed to the washroom.

When I returned after washing my face and putting in my contacts, Nakazato and Morozaki had finally woken up and were getting lightly scolded by the grade supervisor and our homeroom teacher.

Honestly, considering how late I woke up too, I probably should’ve been standing there with them.

I was grateful that their terrible wake-up habits made mine look better by comparison.

□□□

Even though we’d been woken up like it was some kind of emergency, there was still time before breakfast.

Once the teachers left the room, I collapsed back onto the futon, completely drained. I could’ve gone back to sleep if I wanted to — but I didn’t.

“Oh, hey—look at that sunrise!”

Horita raised his voice, staring out the window.

I twitched a little at his words, followed his gaze, then stood up

because I couldn't see well from where I was.

The inn was built slightly higher than the surrounding neighborhood, so if you squinted, you could even see the sea.

The town glimmered in the morning light — it was a beautiful sight.

"The sunrise is gorgeous."

"Sunrises and dawn skies are the prettiest, honestly."

"I'm taking a photo."

"Hiyoki, come over here! It's so beautiful—wait… Hiyoki?"

Watarai, who had been by the window admiring the view, turned to me, his face showing confusion.

The other three noticed too and looked back. "What? What's wrong?" they asked, concerned.

Well, of course they were worried — my face was completely red. Realizing that, I quickly looked down and covered my face with my hands.

I heard the soft rustle of someone moving across the tatami. The sound stopped, and the air seemed to cool a little — someone had stopped right in front of me. A gentle hand rested on my shoulder. "What's wrong? You feeling sick?" Watarai asked softly.

Then I heard Nakazato's voice: "Should we tell the teacher?" He rubbed my back reassuringly.

"…No," I managed to say, my voice trembling.

The truth was… the reason was way too embarrassing to admit.

I must've looked really bad, because Horita started, "Maybe we really should tell the teacher —"

I shook my head firmly.

The guilt of worrying them was worse than the embarrassment, so I took a slow breath, keeping my gaze down as I lowered my hands from my face. My skin still felt hot — no doubt my face was still bright red.

Watarai gently took my lowered hand and held it, waiting for me to speak. The other three stayed quiet, not teasing, just patiently waiting for my words.

…Yeah. I guess I really do have to say it, huh.

“……because.”

“Hm?”

“……that’s why.”

“It’s okay, take your time.”

My voice kept getting smaller and smaller, but the four of them patiently waited for me. Just say it, I told myself. Deal with whatever comes after later. I took a small breath.

“…I–It’s just… my name… is Asahi.”

I managed to get the words out — but once I said them aloud, I instantly realized how ridiculously stupid it sounded.

Basically, that was it.

My name is Asahi (which literally means “morning sun”). So when the four of them kept saying, “The morning sun is beautiful,” I just… got embarrassed on my own.

If I’d ignored it, it would’ve been fine — but my half-asleep brain decided to take it personally.

A long silence followed.

Yeah, I figured.

Whether I said it or not, this was going to be awkward either way.

Now what?

Should I say, “Just kidding”?

After getting that flustered and worrying everyone?

Morozaki would probably throw me out the window.

What do I even do?

Somebody save me.

My mind was running, but my body felt frozen — like I was paralyzed.

“What’s that? That’s so cute.”

“Eh?”

The unexpected response made me lift my head.

Before I could even read Watarai’s expression, he suddenly hugged me tightly. Wait—how did it even come to this?!

“God, I was so worried! I thought it was something serious.”

“Same, I thought you were gonna say it was some illness or something.”

“I got tense for nothing.”

Still in Watarai’s arms, I glanced over his shoulder at the other three — they were laughing with visible relief, hands on their chests.

Somehow, miraculously, I’d escaped total humiliation. What good guys.

Regaining my composure, I gently pulled back and told Watarai, “Thanks.” I needed to wash my face again.

Grabbing my towel, I headed back to the washroom.

When I returned, the four of them were taking photos of the real morning sun — not me, thankfully.

I wanted to take one too, so I picked up my phone from the desk, unlocked it, and walked toward the window.

Horita noticed me and stepped aside to make room.

“Thanks,” I said as I slipped in between him and Watarai.

The window had been opened earlier, and the morning air brushed against my skin. It felt refreshing — like it was cleansing me from the inside out. I’m terrible at waking up early, but… this wasn’t so bad once in a while.

I turned my phone sideways and framed the view before me. Click.

The sound of the shutter, and the sunrise was captured in my camera roll. Not bad — I actually took a pretty good shot.

“I like the morning sun better than the evening one, actually… ah—”

Horita froze mid-sentence, quickly clapping a hand over his mouth and glancing at me nervously.

He didn’t need to worry so much.

“I’m fine. I’ve built up immunity to ‘Asahi’—today was just a system glitch.”

“What the hell do you mean by ‘immunity to Asahi’?”

Morozaki said in disbelief.

Seeing me finally back to my usual self, Nakazato smiled, relieved.

“Anyway, we should probably get dressed and head out soon, or we’ll be on the lecture course again.”

Remembering something, Watarai spoke up.

For a moment, time froze.

Well, it was us who froze, not time.

As if a spell had been broken, we all suddenly started moving in a hurry.

“Crap! I didn’t hear a single thing about the schedule, but I really can’t handle another scolding.”

“Same. Pretending to listen again is too much effort.”

Nakazato and Morozaki muttered while getting ready. Dear grade supervisor, can you hear me?

These two not only didn’t listen — they haven’t reflected at all.

I changed from my gym clothes into my uniform, folded my futon, and stacked it with Nakazato’s and the others’.

When I opened the door and stepped into the hallway, I could see

other students already moving. Looks like we'd narrowly escaped another scolding. Probably. After Nakazato locked the door, we started walking toward the main hall.

The hallway music was different from last night's.

I idly listened as we walked, wondering if they changed it depending on the time of day.

□□□

"Morning, Himawari. How're you feeling?"

"Himawari~! How was the grade supervisor's morning wake-up call?"

"I could hear her yelling all the way from my room, Himawari."

As I sat in the same seat as last night, waiting for breakfast to be served, Tsujitani and the others came over to talk.

This morning, Minase was with them too — he's from a different middle school, but we're in the same club.

There are four of us second-years in total.

"Stop calling me Himawari already."

"Anyway, what should we do for souvenirs for the upperclassmen and first-years?"

Ignoring my complaint, Ino cut in.

Listen to me, please.

"We can just buy something at the station before we get on the shinkansen, right?"

"Maybe get something that comes in sets of five each?"

"Let's message in the group chat about what kind we're buying, so we don't end up with duplicates."

Our club has seven third-years and ten first-years.

With only four of us second-years, even forgetting one person's share could leave us short.

“Don’t forget, guys,” I said, and the three of them gave me a thumbs-up, saying, “Leave it to us.”

That somehow made me more anxious.

Once the souvenir talk wrapped up, Tsujitani circled back to the morning incident. I tried to recall everything and explained what had happened. The three of them burst out laughing, dubbing it “The Himawari Incident.”

Then, the grade supervisor — the very topic of our earlier conversation — stepped forward holding a microphone.

Tsujiya and the others hurriedly said, “See ya!” and rushed back to their seats. I waved a little to send them off. When I turned back to our table, breakfast had already been served before I even noticed.

With the sound of the mic switching on, the grade supervisor began speaking. “Good morning, everyone! Did you all sleep well? Seems like some students got a little too relaxed, though.”

The supervisor glanced in our direction.

Out of reflex, all of us looked away in different directions. If we’d just stayed calm, it might’ve passed unnoticed — but now it was like we’d openly confessed, ‘Yes, that was our group.’

Though considering even Minase’s group had heard about it, it was probably too late anyway.

“Let’s enjoy today as well, and stay focused! Alright then— itadakimasu!”

A chorus of cheerful “Itadakima~su!” filled the hall.

I took a sip of miso soup and exhaled in relief.

It felt like the first time in ages I’d had a relaxed breakfast. On weekends, I usually sleep in until noon, so breakfast and lunch merge into one meal, and on weekdays, mornings are too hectic to eat slowly.

Moments like this really give off that school trip vibe.

Breakfast was Japanese-style — kind of like the bento I’d eaten on the bullet train yesterday, but freshly cooked rice hits differently.

While flaking my grilled salmon, I glanced up at the others. Nakazato and the rest were eating, but their expressions looked gloomy. I didn't exactly want to force conversation, but total silence felt awkward, so I spoke up almost without thinking.

The big event everyone was dreading came to mind.

"Do you guys really hate the free activity that much?"

All four of them nodded at the exact same time.

How much do they hate it, seriously?

But after last night's so-called "love talk" — which was more like a mutual wound-digging session — I could kind of understand.

"It's not like the teachers are watching you the whole time," I said. "You just set a meeting time and split up."

"…You have a point."

Nakazato went quiet for a bit, thinking it over, and then suddenly burst out, "That's it!" Her energy returned all at once.

Apparently, in their minds, the plan had been to stick together the entire time. Honestly, it was kind of cute how they were worrying about the girls. Not that I'd ever say that out loud — I'd probably get stabbed for it.

As soon as they saw a bit of hope, Horita, Morisaki, and Watarai perked up too, chatting noisily again.

Our destination was a theme park that had been featured on TV recently — apparently brand new.

It seemed more like the kind of place you'd go privately than on a school trip, but since we rarely got to go all the way to Kansai for fun, we figured we might as well enjoy the free time.

By the way, I can't handle thrill rides, so I'm planning to be the bag holder.

"I can't do roller coasters," I said.

"Yeah, I know," someone replied.

"So what can you ride?"

“As long as it’s not too intense, I’ll be fine.”

“Then maybe you can ride the merry-go-round while we’re gone?”

“No way.”

When we were deciding where to go, I mentioned I couldn’t handle thrill rides. They tried to be considerate, saying, “Then maybe we should pick a different place,” but I somehow convinced them — though not very convincingly — that “It’s fine, we’ve got an odd number anyway, so someone would end up alone.” I just didn’t want to ruin the mood over my own issue. That’s the official excuse, anyway.

The real reason? I could feel the pressure from the girls. Honestly, I’d rather they pour that enthusiasm into the guys they actually like, not me.

After finishing breakfast, I leaned back in my chair, basking in that pleasant full-belly feeling.

The four of them were huddled around a phone, looking at the theme park map, getting excited over rides and food.

While I was thinking about how to kill time during their rides, the grade supervisor’s voice echoed through the hall.

“Alright everyone, have you finished eating? We’ve got a full schedule today, but let’s make it a meaningful and memorable one! Now, let’s say our thanks — gochisousama deshita!”

Voices of “Gochisousama~!” filled the room as everyone stood up one after another. Since we were staying at a different hotel tonight, this was our last meal at this inn. That thought made me a little nostalgic.

I pressed my hands together for a moment longer than usual and stood up. Without waiting for the doorway to clear, everyone started shuffling toward their rooms. Watarai came up beside me and spoke.

“Hey, let’s sit together at the front of the bus today.”

“Sure, but what about the other three?”

“Eh, they’ll be fine.”

He turned around and told Nakazato and the others, “Hiyoki and I are sitting together today.” The three just said “Okay,” and immediately

started playing rock-paper-scissors to decide who'd sit next to the girls.

I could hear the chaos behind us — poor guys, it sounded rough. And then, out of nowhere, a thought crossed my mind.

Is it even fun to sit next to me?

I mean, I talk when someone talks to me, and I'll speak up if I have something to say, but otherwise I stay quiet.

That's all.

I'm not particularly funny either.

I've always been surrounded by people who can keep conversations lively, so I never really thought about it before — but now that I do, it's kind of puzzling.

I glanced over at Watarai walking beside me.

He must've noticed my gaze, because he tilted his head and went, "Hm?" as if to ask what's up.

Should I just ask him?

What do you even like about me?

"……"

Nope. I'd sound like some clingy girlfriend.

I shook my head to clear that dumb thought and instead said, "Can't wait for today." I forgot to specify what exactly, but since it's the school trip, he'd get it. From beside me came a cheerful, "Yeah!"

□□□

We thanked the inn staff who came out to see us off, then boarded the bus. I took a window seat, and when I saw the staff waving, I waved back — a little shyly. The bus slowly started to move.

It had rained last night, but today was perfectly clear.

The sunlight reflected off the damp ground, making it sparkle like the surface of water.

“By the way, Hiyoki, what do you usually do on your days off?”

I was staring absentmindedly out the window when Watarai suddenly spoke to me. I turned my gaze away and stared at the plastic bottle sitting in the drink holder for no reason, thinking, “Hmm.” I didn’t really have any strong hobbies, so I couldn’t give a clear answer. Trying to recall something, I thought about my recent weekends.

“I usually carry my sister’s bags… I guess I go out a lot.”

“Oh, really? So you’ve got a sister.”

“Two older ones.”

“Ah… that explains it.”

“Huh? Explains what?”

Watarai looked like he’d just figured something out and smiled mysteriously. When I asked, he only said, “Nah, it’s nothing,” with a grin.

Come on, now I’m curious.

He always says or does stuff that leaves me vaguely unsettled — and when I try to dig deeper, he just waits me out in silence until I give up.

Unfair. Way too unfair.

Just because you’ve got a nice face doesn’t mean you can get away with everything.

I sighed and steered the conversation back.

“You got any siblings, Watarai?”

“Yeah, a little brother. He’s ten years younger.”

“Ah… that explains it.”

So that’s why he’s so caring.

The way he naturally pats people on the head or fusses over them suddenly made sense. When he looked at me and said, “What’s that supposed to mean?” I smiled sweetly and said, “Nothing.”

Your turn to feel confused, buddy.

While I was being petty for no reason, someone shouted from the front of the bus:

“Deer!”

…What?

Deer? Like actual deer?

At that, the entire class rushed to the windows, pressing their faces against the glass to look outside. I leaned in too, trying to spot it.

“I see it!” Watarai said.

I turned to look — he was leaning into the aisle, looking ahead. That way, huh?

I leaned toward his side to get a better view—

Clonk!

“‘Ow…!’” we both groaned.

Our foreheads had smacked right into each other when he pulled back at the same time I leaned in.

We both clutched our heads, wincing in pain.

Okay, that one was definitely my fault.

“Sorry,” I muttered, rubbing my head.

“Nah, my bad too,” Watarai said, lowering his hand from his forehead. Through his bangs, I could see a faint red mark starting to form. Before I realized it, my hand reached out and started gently rubbing his forehead.

How many years in prison do you get for injuring a handsome guy’s face? It’s the face, of all things.

Probably a life sentence.

Goodbye, my future.

While I was mindlessly thinking nonsense and rubbing his forehead,

Watarai grabbed my wrist, saying, “It’s fine, really.”

I quickly pulled my hand back, mumbling another, “Sorry.” He looked slightly flushed and said quietly, “…yeah,” before fixing his bangs. Maybe he felt embarrassed being treated like a kid.

Sorry for everything, seriously.

“If I were a samurai, I’d have committed seppuku by now,” I said. Watarai blinked, then laughed. “You don’t have to go that far.”

When we arrived at the first destination on the schedule, the welcome was… extravagant, to say the least.

Deer.

So many deer, it was like they’d gathered every single one in the country.

“Nakazato~! Over here!”

“You’ve got quite the appetite, Nakazato.”

“Hey, don’t take them all, Nakazato!”

Hotta, Morisaki, and Watarai were calling out Nakazato’s name nonstop. I stood next to him and tried to talk to the grumpy aura he was radiating.

“They’re calling you, you know.”

“…Shut up.”

Just by speaking, I seemed to make Nakazato even more irritated. I was only trying to help.

By the way, why were the three of them calling the deer “Nakazato”? It started with the animal-diagnosis app we played with on the bus yesterday. The app “judges” what animal your face looks like. Nakazato was classified as a deer. That’s it. High school boys’ nonsense, no deeper meaning.

“…You’re not going to call me that?”

“Huh?”

Nakazato frowned, clearly puzzled by my silence.

“I mean, why don’t you tease them like the others?”

“Well… I’m a cat.”

“Ah…”

My face had been classified as a cat. Cats are everywhere. Free-roaming deer may be rare, but cats are common no matter where you go. In other words, even if I teased Nakazato, I’d just be opening myself up to way more ridicule.

Realizing that, Nakazato muttered, “Sorry about that,” and lightly patted my shoulder. Stop it, don’t look at me with pity.

Now I was getting irritated. Nakazato then handed me a deer cracker. I didn’t need it. Still, I took it anyway. Since we were here, I might as well interact with the deer.

I offered the cracker to a deer nearby. When it noticed I had food, it came closer, and I gave it to the deer. Watching it nibble, I thought about how big its eyes were, how its antlers could hurt if they poked someone… and eventually concluded simply, “Yep. It’s a deer.”

“Alright, let’s head to the main hall now~”

I was still caught up in feeding the deer when our homeroom teacher’s voice called out. I handed out the remaining crackers to the nearest deer. The three who had been teasing Nakazato finished feeding too, and we all moved carefully through the crowd to the main hall.

“Looks like another school’s here too. I don’t recognize their uniforms,” Hotta said, glancing back as we walked.

Now that he mentioned it, I looked around. Sure enough, students in unfamiliar uniforms were scattered around. I realized that overlap happens during school trips. I wondered which school they were from when suddenly someone tugged on my arm.

“Watch where you’re going, you’ll bump into someone.”

“Oh, sorry… there are a lot of people.”

“No, the deer.”

“Deer…”

I repeated Watarai’s words in my head. Of course, deer don’t speak

human language, nor do they politely avoid oncoming people. If we weren't careful, a collision was inevitable. I bowed my head to a deer that probably almost bumped into me. Whether by intent or coincidence, the deer bowed back. …It can do that?

Passing through a massive, imposing gate, a beautiful garden spread out before us. We walked straight along the stone-paved path toward the main hall.

"Pretty spacious."

"Hey, there are koi in the pond."

"Is there koi-feeding here?"

"Wait, is photography allowed?"

The four of them were enjoying the garden as they walked. Honestly, I hadn't expected them to be so interested in a sightseeing-heavy spot. Once they realized photography was allowed, they started snapping pictures everywhere. Watching their backs, fully immersed in taking photos, I also pulled out my smartphone.

Before I knew it, someone called my name.

"Hioki!"

Looking up, I realized they'd gotten quite a distance ahead. I hurriedly put my phone in my pocket and jogged toward them. Passing other tourists and students from different schools, I noticed their uniforms — fancy, detailed, probably private schools. I had always imagined private high school trips going overseas, but they came to places like this too, apparently.

"'Asahi?'"

While lost in my thoughts, a girl called my name as we passed each other. My feet froze.

No girl at school ever calls me by my first name. I don't have many close female friends, if any — except for one.

I turned to her, certain of who it was.

"Ah, it's Asahi!"

The girl's face lit up as she came closer. It was Anna Ikegaya, a

classmate from middle school. The girl I used to give love advice to.

“Long time no see.”

“About a year, right? You’ve grown taller.”

“Yeah, Anna, are you on the school trip too?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Hey, I don’t recognize that uniform. Which high school did you go to?”

“Oh! I took the entrance exam out of the prefecture.”

Ah, that explains why I didn’t recognize it. Just as I was processing that, Anna said, “I really wanted to wear this uniform,” swaying her body from side to side to show it off.

“How’s it look?”

“…It suits you.”

“Don’t tell such an obvious lie.”

Why do they always figure it out? I don’t really care about uniforms, so I can’t even relate to her obsession. Still, I’d like some credit for giving a polite compliment.

“You won’t get any attention with that,” Ikegaya teased. I was about to reply, none of your business, when a voice came from behind.

“Hioki! We’re taking the group photo, come on!”

“Ah! Sorry!”

I had been moving way too slowly, so Watarai and the others came to fetch me. I’d completely forgotten how rushed we were. Truly, I felt awful.

Noticing Ikegaya, Watarai asked,

“Friend of yours?”

“Yeah, a friend from middle school.”

“Whoa. Legit handsome, huh?”

If only she hadn't said that out loud… she's already beautiful, no need to talk. I realized she probably spoke her inner thoughts aloud. When I looked at Watarai, she immediately saw Ikegaya speaking. Ikegaya noticed my gaze and apologized, then introduced herself in a slightly higher tone: "Um… Hioki-kun's friend. Nice to meet you."

She then glanced at Morisaki and Nakazato, who had come to fetch me, and her inner thoughts seemed to spill again. I braced myself for messages asking about how I got close to them. Too much trouble. Best to leave them unread.

"Hey, seriously, we need to go now."

Looking at Hotta, who had arrived last, Ikegaya brightened. "Hotta-kun!"

"Ah, Ikegaya! Long time no see."

"Long time! How have you been? Wait, you and Asahi are close?"

"It's this school trip thing."

"Hmm, what started it—"

Sensing this conversation would drag on, I quickly cut in. "Sorry, Anna, but we really have to go now."

She pouted, but then remembered she was also on the trip and turned back to her friends.

"See you! Sorry for bothering you!"

Flipping her long, glossy black hair, she waved and ran off. I waved back. Just as I was turning to leave, her voice called out again:

"Asahi! I'll message you again, so stop leaving me on read!"

It was probably about Watarai and the others. I waved one last time and finally faced forward.

"Really sorry, let's go," I said, gathering the four of them and jogging lightly toward the group of classmates already assembled.

"Something tells me," Morisaki started as we ran, "that girl's the one you were giving love advice to yesterday, right?"

"Yeah. Spot on."

I had no reason to hide it, so I nodded.

“How’d you know?”

“Because the only girl from middle school who’s close to you is her.”

“Really? That’s not intuition—there’s literally only one option.”

“Oh, come on… I was impressed for no reason. Give me back my admiration!”

Nakazato, who had been listening, tapped Morisaki on the shoulder. “Hey, you’re the one impressed for no reason,” Morisaki replied, rubbing his own shoulder. Friendly as ever.

Back with the class, the homeroom teacher called out, “You’re late!”

“Ah, well… the photographer hadn’t arrived yet, so it’s fine. What were you doing?”

“Uh, I… helped a girl.”

I couldn’t help but lie under the teacher’s pressure. The teacher gave me a suspicious look, then glanced at the four behind me. “Really?”

I shot them a look, silently telling them to nod. They exchanged glances, then all nodded. The teacher was quiet for a moment before giving my arm a light poke. “Not bad,” they said, moving toward the arriving photographer. My lie had been praised. Relief washed over me. A bit guilty, but better than getting scolded.

“Thanks. You saved me.”

“Consider it even,” Morisaki replied with a teasing grin. Fair enough—I guess I deserved that one. Watarai might be owed ten favors after this.

The teacher’s voice rang out: “Line up!” With the garden behind us, we formed the group. Our team was on the taller side, so we got to stand toward the back. No crouching—thank goodness.

“Are poses allowed?”

“A peace sign is fine, I guess.”

“Do we do a ‘gal peace’ or something?”

“Can’t see our faces anyway; we’d have to retake it.”

Nakazato’s question was answered by the three. Peace signs were easy for me, so I flashed one at the camera and plastered on a smile.

“Alright, everyone! Give me your best smiles!”

The photographer seemed pretty cheerful—almost like he was coaxing a group of kids— waving his hands and calling out, “Eyes on the lens!” But he didn’t press the shutter; instead, he lowered the camera. He started giving instructions to straighten the line, apparently dissatisfied with the arrangement.

“Which Hō should I do?”

While adjusting the line, Watarai whispered to me from beside me. “Cheese or purikura?”

“Purikura style, maybe?”

“No, I vote Cheese.”

He was referring to the way we’d talked about taking pictures during the face-type app thing. I couldn’t believe he remembered… though even hearing “Hō” made me think it was a standard shout. I froze in my peace-sign pose, silently protesting in my head.

The photographer lifted the camera again and called out: “Okay, ready? 1 plus 1 is—???”

“Is this… a new kind of thing?”

I couldn’t help laughing, and at the same time, the shutter clicked. This was the worst. I probably looked ridiculous. Weren’t we supposed to go “Say cheese” or “3, 2, 1”? And Nakazato, don’t make jokes before the shutter clicks! I muttered complaints internally, blaming bad timing on Nakazato and not the completely innocent photographer.

They snapped two more shots just to be safe. I prayed the first one wouldn’t end up anywhere as I lowered my hands from the peace pose.

Once the group photo was done, the teacher instructed us to head back to the bus. Gradually, the four of them seemed to lose some of their excitement too.

I repeated Watarai's words in my head. Of course, deer don't speak human language, and they certainly don't make an effort to avoid oncoming people. If we weren't paying attention, a collision would be inevitable. I probably just barely avoided one, so I bowed my head instinctively and muttered, "Sorry."

Whether intentional or accidental, the deer bowed back. Wait, it can do that?

Passing through a grand, imposing gate, we entered a spacious garden. Walking along the stone-paved path, we headed straight toward the main hall.

"Wow, it's huge."

"Ah, there's carp in the pond."

"Is there any feeding for them?"

"And are we allowed to take photos?"

The four of them were enjoying the scenery. I had underestimated their interest in sightseeing spots. The moment they realized photos were allowed, they pulled out their phones and started snapping away.

I got absorbed in taking pictures too, until I heard someone call my name. "Hiyoki!" Looking up, I saw that the four had gotten quite far ahead. I quickly stashed my phone in my pocket and jogged toward them.

Passing other visitors and students from unfamiliar schools, I noticed their unique uniforms. I had always associated private school trips with overseas destinations, so seeing them here was a surprise.

"Shōyō?"

I froze, caught off guard by a familiar voice. Turning my head, I saw a girl from middle school—Ikegaya Anna. She was the one I had given advice to about romance.

"Long time no see."

"About a year, right? You've grown."

"Yeah. Are you on the school trip too?"

“Yes!”

“I don’t recognize that uniform. Which high school did you go to?”

“Oh! I went for a school outside the prefecture!”

Ah, that explained why I didn’t recognize it. Anna twirled, showing off her new uniform.

“How does it look?”

“…It suits you.”

“Don’t lie so obviously.”

Even without caring much about uniforms, I had managed to compliment her. She frowned and teased, “You’ll never be popular like that.”

I was about to retort, but a voice called from behind.

“Hiyoki! Quick, come on, we’re taking the group photo!”

“Ah, sorry!”

We had been so slow that Watarai and the others had come to fetch me. I felt really bad. Watarai noticed Anna and asked, “A friend?”

“Yeah, a middle school friend.”

“Whoa. Real-life handsome, huh.”

I mentally groaned at her outburst. Anna noticed my gaze and quickly apologized, raising her voice slightly: “Ah… he’s Hiyoki’s friend. Nice to meet you.”

Watarai, Morisaki, and Nakazato were all observing silently, while Anna’s eyes flicked between us, probably sending me mental messages demanding explanations. I ignored them —unread messages would do just fine.

“Hey, seriously, we should go now,” Morisaki reminded.

The photo would wait. I waved goodbye to Anna, who called out once more, “Shōyō! Don’t ignore my messages this time!” I waved again and turned toward the group.

“Really sorry, let’s go,” I muttered, jogging back to the class. Morisaki then spoke again:

“My gut tells me… that girl’s the one you were giving advice to yesterday, right?”

“Exactly.”

“It suits you.”

“Let’s take a photo while we’re at it.”

Watarai pulled out his phone, positioning it toward the mirror and wrapping an arm around my shoulder. I flashed a peace sign at the mirror, and he muttered, “Alright, say cheese.” After a moment, he lowered the phone and suggested we take the photo outside instead.

“Hey, include us too!”

Horitada called out as he noticed we were taking pictures. He was wearing dog-like ears on his head; apparently, there weren’t any dragon-themed ones. Nakazato had bear ears, and Morisaki held black cat ears—seemingly chosen for aesthetic effect.

The five of us lined up in front of the mirror. It felt like déjà vu from the inn’s washroom. Then, Watarai noticed something.

“Uh… shouldn’t we buy these before taking the photo?”

“Ah.”

Realizing the oversight, the four of us hurried to the counter. While waiting in line, I leaned toward Watarai.

“You’re gonna have to delete that first photo, right?”

“…That one’s just for personal use, so I won’t.”

He paused briefly before answering. I had assumed he’d post it on a daylog, but apparently not.

Once everyone had finished paying, we took another round of photos. A staff member mentioned, “There’s a mirror for checking the fit—you can take photos there too.” The mirror was more decorative than the regular ones, with slightly stronger lighting. Perfect for photos.

After stepping outside, the faint smell of popcorn reached me. I

realized I was hungry. I pulled out the park map from the pamphlet to locate a snack stand, but Nakazato suddenly called out.

“Whoa… the person doing the patrol here is the grade head?”

Ahead of Nakazato’s gaze, the grade head was chatting with another group. We instinctively closed the distance between ourselves and the girls. One misstep here, and it felt like we might end up on an accidental “date course” with the grade head.

“Hey! Where should we go after lunch?”

The girls noticed us approaching and called out.

“That, and that!”

Horitada pointed with his finger. Ahead of us were attractions that looked utterly nauseating —roller coasters plummeting at right angles, pendulum rides spinning wildly. Just watching them made my stomach turn.

“Whoa! We’re going on those too!”

The girls, after checking out the rides Horitada indicated, jumped in without hesitation. I really wanted that kind of decisiveness.

“First, let’s eat lunch.”

Watarai spoke up to rein in their almost explosive excitement. Right, I’d forgotten how hungry I was. We headed toward the food stalls. Along the way, park staff called out, “Enjoy yourselves!” and “Those headbands suit you!”—whether it was typical Kansai cheerfulness or not, it boosted everyone’s mood. At the stall, staff asked, “Where are you all from?” and directed playful comments at Watarai and the others: “Such handsome guys, huh?”

We grabbed hot dogs and found a free table on the terrace.

“Ah, there’s a mascot over there!”

Horitada spotted a costumed character holding balloons walking by.

“I really don’t like those,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“When I was little, holding hands for photos felt… off. I just couldn’t

handle it."

"Oh… that's rough."

Apparently, I had dredged up an unpleasant memory for Nakazato. Childhood experiences can stick with you for a long time.

It seemed like parade time. Behind the mascot, musicians marched in, performing a street act. The park's background music blended with the live instruments. People around were filming, clapping, and cheering—it was lively. I got caught up in watching, and Watarai suddenly spoke.

"You've got ketchup on you."

Watarai tapped lightly at the corner of his mouth with his finger to point it out. I stuck my tongue out at the same spot he indicated. Watarai's cheeks relaxed slightly as he laughed, "Opposite." I stuck my tongue out on the other side but couldn't quite tell if it was right. Just as I was about to give up and wipe it myself, Watarai beat me to it with a tissue. Ah… that's kind of childish.

Glancing at the other three, I saw they were engrossed in the performance, so I felt relieved. I murmured a quick "Thanks" to Watarai and, embarrassed, turned my attention back to the show.

After a somewhat unsatisfying lunch, we headed straight for the roller coaster. I worried that eating just before a hardcore ride might have consequences, but being high schoolers, it was probably fine.

"You sure you're okay going alone?"

"Don't let the grade head catch you."

"Wait, the wait time might be long."

They sounded like kids being left home alone for the first time. I accepted their concern with a thankful nod and said, "It's fine." The girls cheered, "Let's go!" and Nakazato's group started walking toward the waiting line.

"If anything happens, text me," Watarai added, trailing behind the three. Being the youngest, I've never really had an older brother figure to compare to, but seeing Watarai here made me think he must be an amazing big brother at home.

Thinking I'd only wait about thirty minutes, I opened the park map. As I scanned it, I felt my pants tugged.

What the—some pervert?

This area wasn't deserted; it was just in front of the roller coaster, so people were around. Whoever this "pervert" was, they were being brazen. I twisted around to look behind me— but there was no one. Yet the tugging sensation continued.

Looking down, I saw a small boy holding onto the hem of my pants.

"Mama…"

"I'm… not your mom, sorry…"

I spoke politely to a child. He was probably lost, looking for his mother, but I instinctively responded normally out of confusion. I figured I should help him find her while I waited for Watarai and the others. I opened my phone to notify the chat group, but the boy tugged my pants again. Please stop. If anything shows, I'll look like the pervert here.

I fumbled with the keyboard, trying to type: "Helping a lost kid"—but accidentally typed "Help," which made it sound like I was the one lost. The boy tugged harder and harder.

Wait, wait, wait. My pants might actually come off. I gave up on texting, closed my phone, and clutched my pants while crouching down to meet his eye level.

"Pick me up."

As soon as I crouched, he looped his arms around my neck. That explained the tugging. He must have been four years old or so. I'd never held a child like this before, so awkwardly, I slid my hands under his arms and lifted him.

The boy fidgeted to get comfortable, then started looking around, scanning for his mother.

"Where did you come from?"

"My house."

"Ah… no, I mean, where did you get separated from your mom?"

“Over there.”

The little boy pointed toward the deeper area of the theme park. I decided we’d head that way for now, and if we couldn’t find his mom, we’d go to the information desk.

As we walked, the boy’s gaze stayed fixed on my headband. Could you focus on finding your mom instead? Eventually, his small hand reached out to grab it. Since the headband wasn’t secured tightly, it came off easily. But the boy let go almost immediately, and it fell to the ground.

“Hey, don’t do that.”

I crouched to pick up the headband, and the boy wrapped his legs around me, clearly not wanting to be put down. “Pick me up!” he whined, tears welling in his eyes. I had to admit— it was kind of cute. I bent down again, and he immediately looped his arms around my neck. Once lifted, he buried his face into my shoulder, sniffing quietly.

I patted his back gently as I scanned the crowd for a frantic woman—his mother. There were no obvious hints in clothing or hair length, so I had to look for anyone moving in obvious panic. This section of the park was aimed at younger children; kids around his age rode small trains and played in splash fountains. But I still couldn’t spot his mom. Looks like we’d need to head to the information desk.

I set him down on a nearby bench to check the map, but he immediately crouched in front of me, clinging tightly. “Nooo!” he protested. One-handed holding felt unsafe, so after a moment’s thought, I lifted him onto my lap and opened the map. He clung to me like a little koala. A nearby couple gave me warm smiles, making me feel a bit embarrassed.

Tracing the route to the information desk, I realized it was far—almost on the opposite side of the park near the entrance. I should have gone there from the start. Sighing, I told the boy, “Let’s go,” and stood up.

As we walked, several staff members called out cheerfully.

“Such good siblings!”

“Uh, actually he’s lost.”

“Oh! He’s lost?! We can take him here!”

That was a good idea. Surely the staff could take care of him more reliably than I could. I prepared to hand him over, but as soon as I tried, he clung to my clothes and started crying even harder. I worried —would his mother even notice him with all that noise?

“He seems to like you more than us.”

“Yeah… looks like it. I guess I’ll take him to the information desk after all.”

“Really? Sorry about that, you’re staff here too.”

“No, thank you for helping.”

I lifted him again, bowed slightly, and began walking. His crying slowly settled into sniffles as I patted his back, and he began scanning the crowd with alert eyes again.

Watching him, I found myself wondering—what was it about me that he liked?

“What do you like about me?”

“Mama…”

“I’m not your mama.”

The question I’d never been able to ask Watarai slipped out easily to this child. The answer was no help whatsoever.

I adjusted him on my lap and headed for the information desk, my arms starting to feel tired. Winding through the bustling crowd, I finally saw the building ahead.

“We’re almost there,” I told him.

I called out to the boy, but he didn’t respond. Apparently, he had fallen asleep. I’d noticed he had grown quiet earlier, but I hadn’t realized he’d actually dozed off. To make an announcement over the park’s PA, you’d need his name and address anyway. I lightly shook him and patted his back, but he showed no sign of waking. Sighing, I opened the door to the information desk.

Inside, a woman was talking to a staff member. Most likely… his mother. The staff noticed me and said, “Ah!” The woman followed their reaction and turned around. When she saw me, her face lit up with relief, and she hurried over.

“That’s my child! I’m so sorry! Where was he?”

“Uh… by the roller coaster,” I replied.

“Thank you so much… he suddenly wandered off.”

She had a few tears in her eyes, murmuring her relief. I smiled softly, then gestured toward the boy and said, “He fell asleep, though…” The mother smiled awkwardly and reached out to lift him.

As she moved him, the boy woke abruptly and panicked, crying loudly in a way that didn’t match his sleepy state. He clutched my sweater tightly. The mother looked just as perplexed.

At that moment, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I remembered—I was supposed to be waiting for Watarai and the others to return from the attraction. I hadn’t updated the group chat at all… great.

“Sorry, can I hold him for a moment to answer this?”

“Of course! Please! I’m so sorry for all the trouble.”

She bowed her head apologetically. I bowed in return, lifted the still-crying boy, and crouched to support him with one arm while pulling out my phone.

“Hi… Hiyoke! Where are you right now?!”

Watarai’s voice sounded panicked on the other end. I felt awful.

“I found a lost child…”

“Lost child? Are you at the information desk?”

“Yes… he didn’t want to be separated.”

“…Got it. I’ll come there now. Don’t move.”

He hung up. Probably a little angry, I thought. Checking the group chat, messages from Nakazato and the others had arrived too. Ever since the trip began, I’d been causing some kind of trouble. I let out a heavy sigh, filled with guilt.

The boy, exhausted from crying, began to doze again on my lap. Just then, the door opened. I looked up and met Watarai’s eyes. He ran over, breathless, hair slightly disheveled—but somehow still perfectly styled, dazzling.

“Was this supposed to be a drama scene or something?” I muttered to myself.

The female staff whispered something quietly, but I was too focused on the scene unfolding. Watarai crouched down to the boy’s level.

“May I?” he asked the mother. She blinked, slightly dazed, and nodded.

Watarai gently patted the boy’s head. The boy flinched, lifting his face with tears in his eyes, clutching my cardigan tightly. Watarai paused, letting the boy adjust, then softly wiped the tears from his cheeks.

“You did so well on your own,” he murmured. It genuinely felt like a scene from a drama.

“The boy’s mother is here now, so you’re okay,” Watarai continued. The child blinked, processing each word, then hesitantly turned to look behind him.

No way…

“MAMA!!!”

The boy released his grip from me and clung to his mother. Apparently, the panic had started because he didn’t recognize me as a stranger and had been burying his face in my shoulder the whole time, unable to see her or hear her voice over his cries. We’d only managed to mutter “It’s okay” in response—too simple, really.

After he let go, I stood up. Maybe I was as exhausted as if I’d just ridden the roller coaster myself. The mother hugged her child and then asked, “What do we say to the young men who helped you?” The boy ran back to me, clinging to my leg, and smiled brightly.

“Thank you,” he said.

Cute, maybe. I crouched again and smiled, taking his tiny hand in mine. “You’re welcome.”

With a few more formalities to complete, the parent and child headed off, and I stepped out of the information desk. A staff member handed me a sticker, thanking me for looking after the lost child. I thanked them in return and left.

□□□

Awkward. I couldn't even bring myself to look at Watarai walking beside me. I was fumbling for words, and he spoke first.

"The teachers haven't told anyone you were gone, so don't worry."

"…Huh?"

I looked at him in surprise. Watarai smiled gently when he met my eyes.

I had expected anger. I'd caused so much trouble already, especially for him.

"You're not mad?"

"I was a little worried, but you're safe now, so it's all good."

"Ah… r-right…"

My Japanese came out scrambled. I reminded myself: Watarai and I weren't close friends to begin with. Our distance had only shrunk slightly over this trip; I wasn't even sure if I could call us friends yet.

Why does he care so much? Why is he so kind? Why me? My mind spun without answers.

"What do you like about me?"

The words slipped out, and I immediately regretted them. Now wasn't the time. The trip wasn't over yet. If a crack formed here, things would get unbearably awkward. But what's said is said. I looked at Watarai, who tilted his head and smiled.

"Hmm? Who knows?"

Ah, so that's how it is. His concern for me wasn't as serious as I'd been thinking—it was casual, almost whimsical. The weight in my chest lightened.

"So… how was the roller coaster?"

"Insane. I thought I'd go bald."

He recounted the ride in unnecessary detail, making me a little queasy.

We returned to the group, and Nakazato and the others rushed over.

“Hiyoke, you vanish all the time!”

“At least keep us updated!”

“It was rough, especially for Watarai.”

Morisaki glared at Watarai, but he scowled back. He admitted he’d been panicked, and I realized once more how much trouble I’d caused. From the moment I disappeared to the ten minutes it took for Watarai and I to connect over the phone—it was short, but felt eternal.

Had I updated the chat, I would have returned to everyone as a “stranger in distress”— definitely a story they’d tease me about, but better left unsaid.

As we talked, the girls returned from the roller coaster, fixing their hair and makeup.

“Come on, let’s go to the haunted house!”

I completely forgot. Right, that was the story.

We followed the girls as they urged us forward. This haunted house was themed after an abandoned hospital. I wasn’t really in the mood but queued up anyway. Unlike other rides, there was no strict group limit; the speed of the line depended on how long people spent inside. If the group ahead gave up midway, the line moved faster; if they made it all the way through, we’d wait a bit longer.

The queue was indoors. An old man’s voice narrated stories about the hospital, and faint screams echoed from deeper inside. It was a little chilly, so I stretched my cardigan’s hem. Around me, patient lists were displayed, as if flaunting themselves.

“Hioke.”

“…! Wh-what?”

I had been casually reading the lists when my name was suddenly called. Watarai was pointing at the headband on my head.

“This will definitely fall off—take it off.”

Right, I stashed the headband in my backpack.

“Hioke, are you not good with this kind of thing?”

Hotta noticed my earlier reaction and asked. I just nodded, thinking that once inside, I'd scream so much that my discomfort would be obvious anyway.

"I thought you'd be fine… surprising," Hotta said.

"Want me to put you in the middle?"

Nakazato and Morisaki grinned mischievously, like they'd discovered a new toy. I groaned inwardly. Morisaki's bad influence was starting to rub off on Nakazato. Watarai noticed my tension and offered, "Do you want me to hold your hand?" I shook my head to decline but secretly hoped to be placed in the middle.

We handed over our belongings and were given flashlights. Great—poor visibility on top of the glasses incident earlier. The lamp above the entrance glowed blue.

"Watch your step~"

The staff voice sent us in. I ended up walking behind the boys. Nakazato led the way with the flashlight, and we shuffled down corridors. Some doors were open, some closed. Behind the open ones, curtains swayed, shadows moved, and faint whispers echoed. The lights flickered, sometimes revealing, sometimes hiding things.

A creaking door sound came from behind. I turned cautiously. Nakazato shone the flashlight.

A person stood there, their neck bent in an unnatural angle. They made noises—"ah" or "ga." Then their head spun a full circle, and they started moving toward us.

"Kyah!!!"

The girls behind screamed and ran, mixing up the order. We ran too, chased by the zombie-like figure dragging an IV stand. I ran blindly, my voice gone, relying only on Nakazato's flashlight and the occasional flickering lights. I cursed myself—I should have held Watarai's hand back then.

"Watarai… hand…"

I barely managed to call his name. Someone grabbed my hand, and I felt instant relief.

We barreled into a room where the lights suddenly came on. Gasping for air, we all looked at each other. Watarai was clung to by one of the girls.

Huh? Then whose hand was holding mine?

Everyone's eyes widened at me. Technically, it was at my side. I turned to check the hand. It was human, but charred, burned, and covered in blood. By now, I already knew.

I slowly lifted my face. A white coat splattered with blood. A Western-style doll peered at me from the chest pocket.

Raising my eyes further, I saw the neck crudely stitched, unstable enough to make me fear it would come off with the slightest movement. And then the face. The skin was horribly burned, bandages soaked in blood. Eyes rolled around, locking onto me. The mouth moved, muffled under the bandages, shifting unnervingly.

"……Ki"

"…?"

"……o…Ki……"

"…Hi……Oki……"

"Eh?"

In the silent hospital room, the monster had clearly called my name. My name. I could only catch my breath. The girls screamed.

Then the door behind us slammed open, letting in the light from outside. I released my hand instinctively and hurried to put some distance between myself and the monster. Everyone else was already moving toward the exit, so I ran toward the light as well. Glancing back one last time, I saw the monster's head roll across the floor.

Outside, staff were waiting. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my still-racing heartbeat.

"Good job~! Ah! So it was you this time~. That's fake blood, so wash your hands over there."

Still a little dazed, I nodded. "Ah, yes," and headed to the sink. As I washed my hands and reached for a handkerchief, the staff returned with a towel.

“Um… why did the monster inside know my name?”

“Your name?”

“Yes, it called out my name at the end.”

“Huh… maybe it liked you?”

The staff gave an ambiguous answer while I dried my hands. I guess it makes sense they’d dodge the question—spoilers would ruin the fun. I thanked them and returned the towel, then headed back to the group. I slung my backpack over my shoulder.

“Hioke, you okay?”

“Yeah… that was a lot.”

“Some kind of god must be attached to you.”

“Maybe you should get an exorcism.”

The four of them tried to cheer me up. Honestly, so much had happened that I half-seriously considered an exorcism.

“Well, we should probably get going.”

“We could fit in one more ride, though.”

Hotta checked his watch, and Morisaki said he was still fine. I just wanted to go back. Time left: about 30 minutes. Considering the time it would take to move, about 15 minutes. Anything we could ride now wouldn’t have a long line. My eyes met the horses. That’s right, the carousel.

———

Mounting a sparkling horse, I heard the start-up music and felt it slowly move. It had been so long since I’d been on a carousel. I remembered riding with my older sisters when I was younger… though I think I had been on a carriage back then, not a horse.

“Hioke, look over here.”

Watarai, sitting on the horse next to me, held up his phone. I instinctively flashed a peace sign. He didn’t lower his phone for a while, so I tilted my head. “It’s a video,” he laughed.

Say so earlier, geez. I dropped the peace sign and looked away. Honestly, I didn't even know what to do for a video compared to a photo. As I turned my face, Watarai lowered the phone and tapped the screen.

With nowhere else to look, I returned my gaze to Watarai. The slowly setting sun illuminated the sharp contours of his profile. Since he had just filmed me, I pointed the camera at him in return, snapping a photo before he even looked my way.

"My outdoor selfies never turn out great," he said with a smile when he noticed I was taking a picture.

I didn't get his standard for "great," but I said, "You always look cool," and he smiled shyly again.

When the music stopped, the horse gradually came to a halt. We got off and started walking toward the exit.

"That was fun~"

"Let's come again sometime."

"You've gotta get over your fear of thrill rides, Hioke."

"Next time, let's come here on a private trip from Kansai."

We chatted as we walked. Oh yeah—I hadn't looked at souvenirs. I checked my watch, but there wasn't enough time to browse. We could always come again. We passed through the gate, similar to the entrance.

And just like that—back to reality.

———

On the bus ride back to the hotel, it was very quiet. Everyone seemed exhausted and asleep. Even Watarai, unusually, was asleep. His sleeping face might have been the first I'd seen. Sleep made him look a little younger. I watched him for a moment, then looked out the window. The setting sun dyed the city orange; everything looked like it was glowing.

I opened my phone, put it on silent, and photographed the streets from the window.

"Okay, everyone, wake up~! We're almost at the hotel. If someone's

asleep next to you, wake them up."

The homeroom teacher's voice came through the bus's microphone, filling the previously quiet space. I shook Watarai lightly. He furrowed his brow, then opened his eyes.

"Good morning."

"…Morning."

He replied, still half-asleep, staring at me blankly. I thought he might go back to sleep, so I quickly said, "Don't go back to sleep!" just in time. At least Watarai was awake. I stood up slightly and peeked behind me. Surprisingly, Morisaki was already awake, fiddling with his phone. Next to him, Hotta and Nakazato were leaning comfortably toward Morisaki. "Wake them up."

I told Morisaki, who was fiddling with his phone. He lifted his face and started pinching Hotta's cheeks and tapping his shoulders to wake him up. Once Hotta woke, everyone moved on to wake Nakazato.

He didn't wake up easily, so when I mentioned the homeroom supervisor's name, his eyelids twitched. The supervisor's "morning call" might have some niche appeal… maybe I'll try filming it tonight.

We got off the bus and gathered in the plaza in front of the hotel.

"All right, everyone! Good job today! Did you enjoy the second day? Tomorrow's the final day, so let's keep our energy up and make the most of it."

The homeroom supervisor gave a brief greeting and explained the rough schedule. Once that was done, Group 1 started moving.

"Can I have Nakazato's group for a moment?"

While waiting for instructions, the homeroom teacher approached. Their face looked apologetic, which made me a little worried. What could it be? Cancelled barbecue? But that wouldn't be something they'd only tell our group…

I was speculating when the teacher spoke.

"Actually, there was a booking mistake. We reserved a four-person room, so could one of you go stay with another group?"

Ah, I see. One bed short. I wondered about the members of the other

group, but it was just for one night, so no problem. I opened my mouth to volunteer, but Watarai cut in.

“Is it a problem for anything besides sleeping?”

“Huh? I don’t think so, but if five people is better…”

“Then it’s fine.”

What about my opinion? Watarai seemed to be answering as if representing everyone, but we hadn’t really discussed it. I looked at the other three, but none seemed opposed. Oh right, their personal space boundaries were a bit off—I had forgotten. Somehow, it turned into a tacit agreement, and I didn’t argue. Maybe we’ll settle it with rock-paper-scissors.

Finally, the line started moving. We passed through the hotel entrance and headed for the elevator. Room 507. Apparently, the suitcases were already inside.

Walking down the hallway, Nakazato said, “I miss sunflowers.”

I had to agree. Just seeing the room name made it feel familiar somehow. Using our card keys, we entered, and it was a completely normal four-person room. Five suitcases were lined up in the center.

The barbecue would be in the courtyard, so there was no time to relax. As we unpacked, Hotta spoke up.

“Who’s sharing beds with whom?”

“I toss and turn a lot, so I’ll pass.”

“Same here.”

Morisaki and Nakazato immediately raised their hands. From what I remembered of this morning, if I slept with either of them, it would be like getting kicked to the floor. Hotta, Watarai, and I exchanged looks. Given our heights, Hotta and Watarai weren’t a likely pair, so it would be either Hotta and me, or Watarai and me.

“Just let the two who sat together on the bus share,” Morisaki, who had been observing, said. She seemed confident, maybe because one bed was already fixed.

I looked at Watarai. “I’m fine either way,” he said. Seriously? That simple? Hotta said, “Then it’s settled!” I hadn’t even said anything yet,

but considering the ‘favor’ I owed everyone, it was probably for the best that I didn’t argue.

“Oh, let’s get going.”

With the bed arrangements settled, Nakazato checked his watch and stood. Everyone seemed lighter on their feet, probably excited for the barbecue. When we arrived at the courtyard, about eight barbecue grills were already lit. Garden table sets were arranged nearby. It seemed the style was for each group to cook the ingredients placed in the center and eat whatever they wanted.

The homeroom teacher stood at the front and called out:

“All right, everyone! Good job today! Eat plenty and get ready for tomorrow! Let’s begin!”

“Let’s eat!” echoed across the courtyard.

Each group started grabbing their preferred ingredients. We crowded around the central table, shouting out what we wanted Watarai to pick up while he held the plates and tongs. Meat was popular, so we made sure to get plenty.

Returning with a plate piled high, we started grilling immediately. The meat sizzled nicely. Efficient Watarai kept placing ingredients on the grill one after another. Truly impressive—he was like the perfect older brother. I helped beside him with the tongs.

“Can I flip this?” I asked, but usually ended up flipping it myself, often a little undercooked or at the wrong timing. This was harder than it looked.

I realized I knew Watarai and Morisaki’s sibling dynamics, but I wasn’t sure about Hotta and Nakazato. I asked the two who were sitting and drinking juice.

“Do you guys have siblings?”

“Yeah, I have a younger sister and brother,” Hotta replied. “I have a sister,” said Nakazato.

Nakazato continued: “My little sister’s planning to take the entrance exam for this school.” So she would join as a first-year when we were in our third year.

“Oh, do they look like you?” I asked.

“Seriously, they’re identical,” Morisaki answered for Nakazato. I was intrigued.

“Cooked!” Watarai said, carrying a plate full of meat and vegetables. We all dug in while continuing the sibling talk.

“Do you have photos?” Nakazato scrolled through his phone. Soon, we all ended up sharing pictures of our siblings. I didn’t have any with my sisters on me, so I messaged them in our group chat: “Send me photos.”

“Got it,” my sisters replied, and Nakazato showed a photo of his younger siblings sitting on the grass, flashing peace signs. Not recent, but even as kids, the resemblance was striking.

“I’m looking forward to them joining,” Nakazato said. “I’ll tell your sister,” I replied. Judging by Nakazato’s tone, she was probably beautiful. I took a bite of meat—delicious.

“Next, Hotta,” Nakazato prompted. Hotta paused scrolling and showed his phone. There were photos on what looked like a Daylog account—friends and casual snapshots.

“Yeah, definitely similar.”

“I get it, I’ve met Hotta’s sister—she looks just like him when she smiles.”

“A dog-type girl,” someone joked.

Next was Morisaki’s turn. I didn’t know what to expect, but it looked intimidating. Morisaki showed his phone.

“Scary,” Nakazato remarked.

“Probably his older brother’s friends,” someone added. “The photos are wild,” said Nakazato, leaning in.

On screen, next to Morisaki and his taller brother, stood a heavily built man with arm tattoos. If they tried to mug someone, I’d probably hand over all my money. The other three had actually met them, and apparently, “they’re kind when you talk to them.”

“Next, Watarai,” Morisaki prompted. Watarai showed a photo from a sports day. A boy smiled and flashed a peace sign.

“Aww, cute,” I said.

“Super cute. He’s always clinging to Watarai like ‘big brother, big brother,’” Hotta added. I remembered the lost child we helped today —probably the same energy. Made me wish I had a younger brother.

Watarai closed his phone and asked, “What about you, Hioki?”

I opened the group chat with my sisters. Just then, a photo arrived: I had fallen asleep on the sofa, my cat perched on my face, and my two sisters were taking a selfie in front of me. Why did they pick this one? Well, it was the only one, so I showed it to the four of them.

“Don’t mind the background,” I said.

“Your sisters are cute,” Hotta commented.

“But they don’t look much alike,” Nakazato added.

“They’re different kinds of beautiful,” Watarai said.

Honestly, I agreed. My sisters and I didn’t resemble each other much, but we each took after our parents. Just as I was about to close the screen, a message came from my sisters: “Oh, also show them some more photos of us.”

I remembered they had asked the same thing in the car on the first day. I asked, “Is that okay?” The four nodded, stopping their meal, and started checking their hair and bangs. I switched to the front camera and stretched out my arm. Since I was unpracticed at selfies, it shook—Watarai took over.

“I’ll take it,” he said, and the photo saved to the camera roll. I was glad I didn’t appear much, but whatever—I sent it to my sisters.

We continued chatting about siblings, adding more meat to the grill, and getting reminders from the teacher to eat more vegetables. The barbecue ended on a cheerful note.

Back in the room, Hotta said, “Let’s hit the beach and do another barbecue this summer.” The four cheered.

By the time we returned, it was past 8 PM. We took turns showering in order of our roll call. Nakazato, first, headed to the shower. I didn’t lie on the bed, choosing to sit on the window-side sofa after the barbecue.

Unlike a traditional inn, there was only one shower, so by the time everyone finished, it was nearly 10 PM.

After preparing for bed, I zoned out on the mattress. Watarai was the last to finish showering and returned to the room. I moved close to the wall to leave space, but he pulled me up.

“You don’t have to stay so close,” he said as he climbed onto the bed.

With everyone on the bed, the lights were dimmed to the indirect lamps only. I put my glasses on the side table and closed my eyes. Then, like last night, Nakazato spoke: “Hioki-kun, who likes us, don’t go to sleep yet.”

“Uh… huh?”

“What do you mean, likes?” I asked. Nakazato pretended to cry. I vaguely remembered confessing to all four of them last night.

“Well, that aside… that haunted house was seriously scary today, especially at the end,” Hotta said.

“Why did it know your name?”

Morisaki chimed in. Goosebumps ran down my arms just remembering that scene.

“Probably because you called your name. You should take off your headband,” Watarai suggested.

True—my name was the only one called at that moment. Did they just pick that up and act on it immediately? Professionals, indeed. Better to leave it at that.

“So that’s why… By the way, what happened to the lost kid?” Nakazato asked. I explained what happened until Watarai arrived.

“Wow, Hioki, kids really like you,” Hotta said.

“Then maybe you’d get along with Watarai’s little brother too,” Morisaki added. “You should go to this year’s sports day! We’ll be there too,” Hotta said.

They all said it at once. I looked at Watarai lying next to me; he asked, “Want to go?” I replied, “I’ll think about it.”

Tonight, it wasn’t me, but Morisaki—who hadn’t slept on the bus—

who dozed off first. Once she was asleep, I turned off the lights, and we all drifted into sleep. I soon followed into dreamland.

I was covered in blood.

A single bloodshot eyeball stared back at me.

A blood-soaked lab coat, wrapped in bandages, was moving toward me. A bloodied hand reached out—grasping my own—□□□

I shot upright. Tick-tick went the second hand. My heartbeat was deafening. What time was it?

The left hand I felt being held wasn't touching anyone, and there was no sticky, bloody sensation.

I quietly tried to calm my breathing. Yet, when I closed my eyes, that face appeared again, refusing to let me sleep.

Restless, I turned over and found myself facing Watarai. His breathing was steady and regular.

I had held his hand countless times before, even been hugged once. Now, dominated by fear, I longed for that sense of security.

Just for now… just a little… I want to be allowed to touch him. Once I feel safe, I'll let go.

I moved my body and clung to Watarai, burying my face in his chest. I could feel his warmth. I exhaled with relief.

The steady thump of his heartbeat was comforting.

I could get up and leave first, I thought.

But my heavy eyelids betrayed me, and before I knew it, I surrendered to sleep while still clinging to Watarai.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

What Watarai said really felt like a confession. Don't forget to kudos and comment

while reading! I really want to discuss this novel

Noisy.

Way too noisy.

The alarm blaring in the room isn't half as loud

as the pounding in my chest.

I move carefully—painstakingly so—trying not to loosen the arms wrapped around my waist as I sit up.

Yup. No matter how many times I check, it's still the same. Hioki. Clinging to me.

I take a quiet, deep breath.

If I let my guard down, I might actually forget to breathe.

I run my fingers lightly through Hioki's bangs.

That's not enough to wake him.

Tracing along the outline of his face, my fingertips brush his ear.

Yesterday, when his face went bright red all the way to his ears and he looked down… before I knew it, I was holding him.

"…Asahi."

I try saying his name.

Of course, no response—he's still asleep.

My hand moves again, patting his head gently.

Today's the last day of our school trip.

It'll be the last time I get to touch Hioki.

Well—"get to" might not be right. I'm the one touching him without permission.

"…"

There it is again.

That murky something rising inside me.

Maybe I should just… accept it. All of it.

I don't know what'll happen afterward.

Maybe someone will get hurt.

Will I be able to make the right choice?

"…Shut up."

When I stop thinking, the sound of the alarm rushes back to my ears. Reluctantly, I lift Hioki's arm from around my waist and slip out of bed. I turn off everyone else's alarms and pull open the curtains. Might as well open the window too.

If they're cold, they'll wake up. Probably. Who knows.

I squint against the light.

Another annoyingly perfect blue sky.

□□□

Cold.

Without opening my eyes, I shiver and grope around for the blanket.

My hand hits something.

Not glasses.

Not my phone.

Feels… human?

Ah.

I jolt upright.

“Oh, you’re up early today.”

I meet Watarai’s gaze—he’s sitting on his bed, scrolling through his phone. My blurry eyes drift to where I must’ve hit him; his hand’s resting there. At least it wasn’t his face.

Not that hitting his hand is much better.

“…Sorry. I think I hit your hand…”

My throat’s dry, but I manage to croak it out.

Watarai tilts his head. “Hand?” Then he remembers and laughs.

“Oh, it’s fine. Didn’t even hurt.”

“That’s good… uh, morning.”

“Mm, morning.”

He smiles again, handing me my glasses. “Your voice and bedhead are tragic—go wash up.” I nod, take the glasses, and climb out of bed.

Something brushes my foot.

Ah—the blanket. So that’s where it went.

I didn’t think I tossed and turned that much, but I must’ve kicked it off somehow. When I look up, though, I notice the other three beds. No one has their blanket.

Why? The room isn’t even warm.

I pause before heading to the bathroom and glance back at Watarai. He tilts his head at first—“What?”—then smirks like he’s guessed my question.

“Figured if you guys got cold, you’d wake up.”

…Pretty ruthless, actually.

□□□

“That was seriously not cool.”

In the elevator, Morisaki mutters.

Hotta and Nakazato nod wearily.

We’re on our way to the big hall for breakfast.

“Oh, come on. At least you woke up on your own this time, right?”

Watarai—who stripped all our blankets—answers, clearly proud of himself. He’s in an unreasonably good mood today.

Nakazato sighs. “Yeah, but still…”

“There are *better* ways to wake people up, you know?”

“Bet you woke Hioki up nice and gentle, huh?”

Hotta eyes Watarai with mock suspicion.

As if.

“I did the same as everyone else.”

“What? You didn’t, like, pat his head or tickle him awake or something?”

I shake my head.

Where do they even get that idea?

When I glance at Watarai, he looks away.

…He did it again.

While I was asleep.

“This guy just takes advantage ‘cause Hioki never tells him no,” Morisaki says when I frown.

Hotta and Nakazato chime in right after.

“Yeah, seriously. You’ve gotta at least *pretend* to hate it or he’s gonna push too far one day.”

“Exactly. Next thing you know, he’ll try kissing you or something.”

“I haven’t done that. Yet.”

…*Yet*? What do you mean *yet*?

There are absolutely no plans for me to kiss Watarai, thank you very much. I clap a hand over my mouth before anything slips out.

Watarai just laughs. “Kidding, kidding.”

Could you at least tell better jokes?

Right then, a soft *ding* breaks the awkward silence and the elevator doors slide open. The display above still shows *3*—we’ve got a while to go. A few guys from another class are waiting outside.

“Mind if we squeeze in?” one of them asks.

No need to ask, but sure. Nakazato answers, “Go ahead,” and they pile in. Four, maybe five of them.

Ah, I get it now.

Why they bothered to ask.

It’s not the number that’s the problem—it’s that every single one of them looks like they belong to the rugby or judo club. Big guys. *Really* big guys.

As the elevator fills up, I try to turn around and—get shoved from behind. I almost trip, catching myself with a hand on the wall.

“Ah.”

Then I take in my position.

…Oh, great.

A classic wall slam. *Kabedon.*

And of course, the wall I’ve pinned someone against? Watarai.

Exactly who I wanted *distance* from. Physical distance, specifically.

“W-well? You falling for me yet?” he says, half-grinning. “If this weren’t a packed elevator, maybe I would’ve,” I mumble back.

I try to lighten the mood with a joke, but he takes it in stride,

smirking like he's impossible to fluster.

Apparently, charming a pretty boy is harder than it looks.

Ding. The doors open again.

We've hit the first floor. The crowd spills out, and I finally breathe properly again—the air feels fresh compared to the elevator's suffocating atmosphere.

We head down the corridor to the main hall.

Breakfast is buffet-style, with each class's food laid out on long tables. The grade director's voice booms through a mic.

Guess this'll be the last morning we hear his announcements. Weirdly bittersweet.

"Good morning, everyone! Please don't start eating yet—take your seats first!"

So, not yet.

I stop mid-step, turn toward the round tables, and sit down. Once the headcount's done, the grade director starts his little speech.

"Good morning once again! Today's the final day of your school trip. Let's make it a fun and safe one, all right? Now, after we greet, go ahead and get your food. *Itadakimasu!*"

With that, everyone echoes "Itadakima~su!" in cheerful unison, chairs scraping back as they rush for the buffet.

"Let's go," Hotta says, standing up. I follow.

I grab a plate and scan the spread—mix of Japanese and Western dishes. Yesterday's breakfast was all Japanese, so today I go Western: roll bread, consommé soup, scrambled eggs…

Once I've got what I want, I turn to head back when someone calls out.

"Hey, Hioki—try this, man! It's *so* good," Minase says from a nearby table.

As he said that, Minase held out a forkful of cake toward me. I glanced down at my plate, trying to find a spot where I could set it down first.

“You can just eat it,” Minase said, bringing the fork to my lips. I hesitated only a moment before opening my mouth, letting him feed me. Citrus cake—probably natsumikan. Sweet and tart. Really good.

“How is it? Tasty?” he asked.

I nodded.

Then, realizing what just happened, I spoke up.

“Wait—why are you eating dessert *first*?”

“Why not? There’s no rule about the order you eat in, right?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

True enough—there’s no set order for food.

But I have what I call a *dessert mode*.

It’s only supposed to activate at the end of a meal. Right now it’s being forced on early.

I glance down at my plate. Luckily, I only had bread left—not rice. Cake before rice would’ve been… wrong. Somehow.

“Never mind. Thanks for the cake,” I said instead of trying to explain my weird rule. Minase waved a casual “Later,” and sat back down.

A quick glance at his plate told me it was almost entirely dessert. Impressive. Right—he *did* have a major sweet tooth.

I put my plate down and took my seat.

While I was spreading butter on my roll, Hotta kicked off the conversation.

“Where’re we going today again?”

“Some shrine, right?”

“Only in the morning, yeah?”

“Says we’re doing kimono dressing too.”

Looks like it’s going to be another busy day.

Kimono, huh. I probably shouldn’t overeat then.

But between feeling stuffed and being hungry, I'll take stuffed any day. I kept eating.

"Let's test our luck with omikuji!"

"Good idea. Whoever gets the worst fortune has to buy everyone ice cream."

Nakazato suggested it, and Morisaki was instantly in.

So the unluckiest one not only loses but has to pay. Rough deal. I silently prayed for at least a "small blessing" and scooped up another bite of scrambled eggs.

We kept chatting—about which kimono colors we'd get, whether we'd see any more deer. At the mention of deer, Nakazato's face soured, which made me laugh.

When I finished my plate, I went back for dessert.

Grabbed another slice of that natsumikan cake Minase gave me earlier.

"You eat a lot, Hioki," Hotta said as I sat down.

"Guess dessert stomachs are real, huh? You even stole all my melon on the first night," Nakazato added.

They clapped for some reason.

I had no idea why.

"It's normal," I said, and took a bite of blueberry cake.

"That one looks good," Watarai said, pointing at the natsumikan cake. "Want a bite?" I offered, holding it out.

He didn't have a fork, though, and started to get up to fetch one. That seemed like a hassle, so I did what Minase had done—lifted a bite on my fork and offered it to him.

Watarai blinked, surprised.

Ah, right. Maybe he's not the type who's okay with sharing utensils. Feeling awkward, I lowered my hand—but he caught my wrist.

"Thanks," he murmured.

Then, still holding my wrist, he leaned forward and took the bite. When I asked, “Good?” he smiled faintly and nodded.

“I want some too.”

“Me too.”

Morisaki reached out and stole a piece from my plate, followed by Hotta grabbing half of the remaining cake.

I glanced at Nakazato, but he shook his head. “I’m good.”

While I finished what was left of my dessert, the grade director’s voice echoed through the hall.

“How was your last breakfast of the trip, everyone? Delicious, I hope! Please meet in the front plaza forty minutes after returning to your rooms. Groups that are done eating may leave—gochisousama!”

The hall echoed with a chorus of *gochisousama deshita!* My mouth was still full, so I just bowed.

They were probably waiting on me, so I hurried and popped the last piece in my mouth. Too big—my cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk as I chewed.

“No need to rush,” Watarai said, poking my cheek.

“Totally looks like a squirrel,” Hotta snorted.

Stop it, or I’ll choke.

I swallowed and put my hands together. “Thanks for the meal.”

Back in the elevator, then the room.

I sat on the bed, running a hand over the sheets.

Why are hotel beds always this soft?

“Hey, we’ve got kimono dressing today, right? Let’s do hair too,” Morisaki said, plugging in a hair iron by the mirror.

The self-proclaimed *Daylog stylist* clearly wasn’t satisfied with plain hair. I just zoned out watching him arrange wax and spray when Watarai sat down beside me.

“You too, Hioki.”

“Ehh… do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know if I can pull it off.”

“I’ll do it for you.”

As Watarai ran his fingers through my hair, he asked, “You’re not allergic to hair oil or anything, right?”

For some reason, it felt like I’d just stepped into a salon. I gave a small nod.

When he said he’d “style” us, I’d imagined something wild—like a slicked-back host look or some ridiculous all-up hairstyle—but in reality, everyone just tweaked theirs a little. Some flipped up the ends, others tried a loose center part. Nothing too flashy. Watarai finished first and waved me over. “Hiyoki, your turn.” With that hairstyle, he looked even more like a pro stylist. And wow, he was actually *good* at it.

“Um, p-please be gentle,” I said, sitting down a little stiffly. “Of course, sir. How would you like it today?”

He slipped right into character, talking to me through the mirror like an actual beautician.

“How about we try showing a bit of your forehead?”

Before I could answer, Nakazato—sitting beside me—reached out and lifted my bangs. It had been a while since I’d shown my forehead in front of anyone. Well, except the bath, I guess. Still, it felt oddly embarrassing.

“Uhh… I think I’ll keep the bangs down today, thanks.” I covered my forehead and gave my answer.

“Got it,” Watarai said with a grin, then flicked on the dryer.

He lightly dampened my hair and alternated between warm and cool air. “Hiyoki, you’ve got nice brows—let’s thin out the bangs a bit so they show more.”

He turned off the dryer and ran his fingers through my hair from

behind. Wait—"thin out"? He's not gonna pluck anything, right? I had no idea how hairstyling worked, so at this point I just surrendered myself to fate.

"As long as you're not *pulling* anything out…"

"I'm not, don't worry. Just trimming the volume."

He laughed and grabbed a flat iron, then started styling with practiced ease. I decided it'd be weird to stare at myself the whole time, so I fixed my gaze on the mirror's frame instead.

It didn't take long. He adjusted a few strands with some hair oil, then gave a final mist of hairspray.

…Oh. I actually like this scent.

"All done, sir. Thank you for your patience," he said, patting my shoulder lightly. When I looked in the mirror, my forehead wasn't completely exposed, but my bangs were thinner, and my eyebrows stood out more clearly.

So this is the power of a good stylist, huh?

Now if only I had the face to match.

I thanked him, then packed my stuff and brushed my teeth. By the time I was done, it was almost time to gather downstairs.

"Alright, let's go," Nakazato said, and we rolled our suitcases out of the room.

When we reached the meeting area, the girls were already whispering and giggling. I glanced at our group. Yeah, makes sense. They were glowing—literally twice as dazzling as usual.

I couldn't help thinking, *Man, the conversations are so middle school sometimes.*

"Group leaders, report to your homeroom teachers and line up by class one!" the year head called out.

Nakazato trudged off to the teacher. Three days of leadership—guy deserved a medal. Once he came back, we got in line and listened to the next instructions before heading to the buses.

Each class had a different route today.

I handed my suitcase to the bus staff and climbed aboard.

“Wait, did we ever decide who’s sitting where?”

“Eh, same as yesterday’s fine.”

When I turned around to ask, Watarai gave me a gentle push toward my old seat.

After roll call, the bus rumbled to life. But today’s bus wasn’t quite the same as the ones before.

“Good morning, everyone~! I’ll be your guide today. My name’s Hirao~!”

Her cheerful Kansai accent filled the bus. She looked mid-twenties—young and lively. The guys in class erupted into applause and cheers. I gave a small clap too, just to blend in.

As the bus rolled on, Hirao-san chatted about the local history and the shrine we’d be visiting next.

“It’s an ancient shrine, but thanks to the head priest, it’s still beautiful to this day~”

Then, out of nowhere, someone called out, “You’re way prettier than the shrine, Miss!” Who *was* that idiot?

The bus burst into laughter.

Hirao-san blushed and laughed. “You’re smooth, huh~? I almost wanted to give you some pocket money for that!”

Between her tourist trivia and the students’ banter, the ride went by fast. Before long, we arrived at the kimono fitting venue.

“Alright everyone, make sure you all look your best—handsome *and* cute, okay?”

Hirao-san called out cheerfully, her Kansai accent slipping through now that she seemed more relaxed. She waved as we filed off the bus, leaving our luggage behind except for valuables. The boys and girls split into separate groups and entered the building.

“Welcome! Go ahead and pick whichever kimono you like!”

A lively old man greeted us, ushering us into a room lined with rows

upon rows of colorful kimonos.

I had no idea there were *this* many kinds. While I was still gawking, Watarai and the others were already browsing like we'd just walked into a department store.

"Hiyoki, how about this one?"

"...Mm, not quite."

Nakazato held up a bright red kimono against me. Saying "no" outright felt rude, so I gave a vague answer.

Maybe I should shove a flashy gold one on him as payback—but honestly, he'd probably pull it off. They all would.

I settled on a muted, smoky brown kimono. Safe choice. Right around when I finished, the others were done too. Their picks were surprisingly stylish —patterned ones, two-toned ones, stuff that looked like it came straight out of a fashion shoot.

We headed to the changing area, where a few middle-aged women—around our moms' age —were waiting. Not many male staff around.

"Alright, take off your clothes and stand right here~," one of them said, tugging me gently into place.

I handed her my kimono and started unbuttoning my uniform. Even though she was much older, it still felt… embarrassing.

Completely unfazed, she handed me an undergarment set. "Put this on, then this."

Once I was in the thin under-robe, she adjusted the collar and hem neatly, then wrapped a cord around my waist and pulled it *tight*. Oh boy. Hope breakfast stays where it is.

Just when I started feeling winded, she layered the actual kimono over me and began another round of tugs, folds, and tying. Then she reached for the *final boss*: the obi belt.

She pressed it against my waist and wrapped it smoothly, her movements expert and swift. Each time she pulled, it tightened like a vice, and a small "oof" slipped out of me.

"Oh dear, not too tight, right?"

“I-I’m fine!”

I nodded eagerly, desperate for it to end. She paused, gave my stomach a gentle pat—“All done!”—and smiled.

Even if it was a little suffocating, at least it was over. I thanked her, took a deep breath, and turned around.

The guys had already finished and were browsing accessories—small bags and pouches we could borrow. I grabbed a little woven pouch, slipped my wallet and phone inside, and walked over.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Oh, nah, we just finished too,” Hotta said with a grin.

Just trading uniforms for kimonos completely changed the vibe. With their styled hair, they looked… well, unfairly cool.

I glanced at the others—same deal. Why did they look like adults while I still felt like a kid playing dress-up?

The five of us headed toward the exit, slipping into traditional sandals. Walking in them took some getting used to.

While we waited for everyone else in front of the building, passersby kept staring. Can’t blame them—seeing a whole group of teens in kimonos must’ve been a rare sight. A few middle school girls whispered, “Are they celebrities? A photoshoot, maybe?”

“Oh my, y’all look amazing—like real models!”

Hirao-san, already waiting outside, flushed slightly as she complimented Watarai and the others.

They just smiled and said, “Thanks,” before going back to chatting. Honestly, give the poor lady a bit more of a reaction.

Once everyone gathered, we started toward the shrine. The road sloped gently upward, so we had to watch our steps.

Stalls lined the path—selling baby castella, grilled squid—like a summer festival.

“Alright, group photo time!”

When we reached the main shrine building, our teacher called out.

Wait, that voice—

“Good morning, everyone! Let’s see those bright faces!”

Yep. It was *him* again. The same quirky math-teacher-slash-photographer from before.

“He’s back—the math guy.”

“Bet he’s got some weird pose idea again,” Nakazato and Hotta laughed.

Honestly, how many variations could there even be? Still, I took my place near the back of the group.

“Hiyoki, look this way.”

Watarai, standing next to me, called out.

When I turned to face him, he started fixing my bangs and tidying up the rest of my hair. While he was doing that, I didn’t really know where to look, so I just stared past him at the sky and spoke.

"I like the smell of this hair oil."

"Oh yeah? The one I always use… you like it?"

"Yeah. I do."

When I looked him in the eyes and smiled,

Watarai paused for just a second,

then, as if he’d finished, said "’Kay" and turned back to face the camera.

Lately—

or maybe just during this school trip—

I’ve realized something.

Watarai might be weak to my squinty-eyed smile.

Guess I’ll overuse it whenever I need a favor.

I followed his lead and faced the camera too.

"Camera this way!"

The cameraman waved his hand, raising the lens.

"Alright, taking the shot~! …3–1 is~???"

"Come on, seriously? You turning this into a math question?"

Give me a break.

I didn’t laugh as hard as yesterday,

but I’m pretty sure I made another weird face.

"Nakazato, don’t butt in."

"Why not, man? You’d wanna say something too."

While we were getting ready for the second shot,

Morisaki nudged Nakazato with his elbow.

Can’t say I don’t get how he feels.

The cameraman raised his lens again.

"Next one’s probably 2×1, huh."

"Nah, I’m betting on $4 \div 2$."

Watarai and Hotta made their guesses, waiting for the signal.

"Alright, shooting now~! …"

Click

"Only that?!"

All five of us shouted in perfect unison right after the shutter went off. Pretty sure that harmony was flawless.

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Alright, meet back here in an hour~"

Once the group photo was done, the teacher called out. Each group started moving—some to pray, some to the stalls.

"Let’s take one with just us."

Morisaki said, fiddling with his phone.

We moved under the shade of a tree so we wouldn’t block the path. It had white blossoms and smelled really nice.

Morisaki stretched out his long arm, searching for the best angle.

"Ready?"

At his cue, the screen flashed.

I think I’ve gotten kinda used to selfies over these three days. While Morisaki was checking the photo,

Watarai took out his own phone and said,

"Me too."

We took a few more shots,

and then the math uncle—

uh, the cameraman—called out to us.

"Mind if I take one of you guys too?"

He raised his lens as he asked,

and Nakazato nodded, saying,

"Full body, or just close-up?"

Not sure what the difference really is.

After thinking for a moment,

the cameraman said,

"You’re all in kimono—let’s go full body!"

While I stood there stiffly, wondering what to do with my limbs, Watarai touched my shoulder and said,

"Turn a little sideways, but keep your face forward."

Apparently there’s a pose that makes your proportions look better.

"Perfect! Alright, here we go~!"

Guess he’s graduated from math jokes.

The shutter clicked a few times in a row.

After a few shots, Hotta spoke up to the cameraman.

"Why don’t you join us for one too, Mr. Cameraman?"

You were totally about to say “math uncle” just now.

Hotta held up the camera,

and this time all six of us, including the cameraman, were in the frame. He made a finger heart, so we copied him.

Dude’s got the spirit of a high schooler trapped in an adult’s body.

We thanked him with a quick "Thanks a bunch~" and waved goodbye.

"Alright, time to go draw our fortunes."

Watarai pointed further ahead,

so we all headed that way together.

We climbed the steps, walking through rows of torii gates. It’d probably look creepy at night,

but in the daytime, the shrine felt mystical—almost otherworldly.

Once we reached the inner shrine,

we headed straight for the omikuji stand.

We each paid, shook the metal cylinder one by one, and pulled out a numbered stick.

"Please, something like ‘small blessing,’ yeah?"

The number I got was 31.

I opened drawer 31 and pulled the second paper from the top.

"Don’t open it yet—let’s all look together, okay?"

Nakazato said, still shaking his own fortune tube.

I held mine behind my back and waited.

Why am I nervous about this?

Once everyone had theirs, we formed a little circle.

Nakazato said quietly, "Alright, ready?"

"One, two, three—"

We opened our fortunes all at once.

I unfolded mine and read the result.

"Small blessing."

Ah. Yeah. Pretty average.

I don’t know the exact ranking order,

but this feels like the middle of the road.

Checking the others:

Nakazato — medium blessing.

Hotta — great blessing.

Morisaki — small blessing.

Watarai — great blessing.

Wait—seriously? These guys are way too lucky.

Guess it’s true: the gods really do favor the good-looking ones.

“Hiyoki’s probably the lowest one.”

Morizaki said that while checking his phone.

I had kind of guessed as much.

Fine by me if it means I can count this as paying back what I owe.

After that, we went through the smaller fortunes — health, studies, all that. But of course, the one that gets everyone hyped up is always love fortune. Mine said, “Soon, the one you’ve been waiting for will appear.”

…Yeah, right.

Curious, I asked Watarai to show me his.

“Hey, lemme see your fortune.”

“Mm, sure.”

Taking his fortune slip, I skimmed through the lines.

Pretty much everything written was positive.

Well, it was “Excellent Luck,” so that made sense.

I looked at the love section too.

“Believe in yourself and move forward.”

I expected it to say something like “Your love will surely be fulfilled,” but surprisingly, it was more of an advice type.

Then again, it’s not like anyone would reject Watarai if he confessed.

“Thanks,” I said, handing his fortune back.

Once everyone had finished reading, we tied our omikuji slips to the rack. I’ve never been good at these — they tear so easily.

After carefully tying it in place, I pressed my hands together and offered a quick prayer.

“Ah, they’ve got ice cream!”

Just as I finished, Horita called out.

There was a stall selling soft-serve and gelato.

Naturally, it turned into a “let’s get some” situation, so I pulled out my wallet and asked, “What do you guys want?”

“Ah, the treat thing was just a joke,” Morizaki said, glancing over the menu.

Wait— really?

I was so ready to pay that it caught me off guard.

Well, if I don’t have to, then great.

I stopped checking my balance and looked up at the menu too. The matcha soft serve was the top recommendation, but since I was planning to buy matcha souvenirs anyway, I went with the fig gelato in a cup.

With our ice creams in hand, we started walking toward the main shrine. Everyone had chosen different flavors, and up ahead, Nakazato and the others were saying things like “Hey, lemme try that,” sharing bites of their ice cream.

“Hiyoki, wanna try mine?”

Watarai turned around beside me, offering his matcha soft serve. I nodded, stuck my spoon into my cup, and took the cone with my other hand.

Thinking about it now, I should’ve just stopped walking to take a bite, but instead, I tried eating while moving — and ended up getting way too close. A chill ran across the corner of my mouth.

I stuck my tongue out, but couldn’t quite reach it. Did I have tissues somewhere?

While I was rummaging through my pouch, I handed the cone back to Watarai.

He took it — and then gently wiped my cheek with his finger. And popped it into his mouth.

…There it is. The romcom moment.

“...You okay?”

“Oh, sorry, was that weird?”

I panicked and said something stupid.

Watarai blinked, suddenly realizing what he’d done, and looked at me nervously. I quickly shook my head.

He’s got a younger brother — it was probably just instinct. Come to think of it, he wiped my face back at the theme park too. Whenever I’m with Watarai, my “little brother mode” kind of switches on.

“Good,” he murmured, then went back to eating his soft serve. I took a bite of my now slightly melted gelato.

For some reason, it tasted sweeter than before.

When we reached the main shrine, the other groups were starting to gather too. I looked around, wondering what to do with my empty cup. Ah — there's a trash can.

I called out to the four of them.

"Hey, I'm gonna throw this… away."

Using the Kansai phrase Nakazato taught me on the first day. For a moment, all four looked confused — then remembered, and burst out laughing.

"Oh! Nice one, Hiyoki!"

"Go on, toss it, then~"

Horita and Nakazato waved as I walked off.

Careful not to trip, I tossed the cup into the trash.

"Hey, you there."

A voice called from behind.

When I turned around, it was our bus guide, Hirao-san. I tilted my head. "Yes?"

"Um, could I… take a photo?"

Huh? Probably not *with me*, right?

If she wanted a picture together, she could've just said so. Maybe she was shy.

"With those four, right? I think they'd be fine with it."

"Really? Thanks~"

Not that I had any authority to say so, but Hirao-san smiled brightly. When I returned to the group, I hesitated for a moment before saying,

"Hey, how about we take a photo with the bus guide? For memories and all."

This way, it'd seem like I was the one suggesting it, making it easier

for her to join in. Hirao-san met my gaze and nodded with a cheerful "Thank you~." The four exchanged glances, then shrugged as if to say, "Sure, why not." I reached out to take her phone.

"Hiyoki's not getting in the photo?"

Watarai frowned.

Crap. The way I phrased it, it *did* sound like I was including myself. But she probably just wanted one with the four of them…

"Five of us would look more balanced, right? Like, uh, a ranger team or something."

…What am I even saying.

Should've stopped at "balanced." The "ranger" part was unnecessary. Still, Watarai didn't look satisfied. He grabbed my arm and took Hirao-san's phone from my hand.

"Mind if we do a selfie? We might not fit the whole thing otherwise."

Hirao-san nodded enthusiastically.

Sorry, Hirao-san. Please edit me out later if needed.

Watarai pulled me closer by the shoulder and lifted the phone. He took several shots, then handed it back.

Hirao-san smiled warmly as she checked the photos. "Thank you so much~."

"Would it be okay if I posted these on SNS—"

"Bus guide-san! Take one with us too!"

Before she could finish, a group of guys ran over, crowding around her. In no time, she was surrounded.

I couldn't help but think — maybe she's actually following one of the four on social media. No proof, but it seemed likely.

When I looked back, the four of them were swarmed by girls now. Man… being popular must be exhausting.

"Alright! Let's head back to the dressing hall~"

The teacher finished the headcount and led everyone back the way we came. The four guys, worn out from all the attention, looked completely drained.

“I’m so tired I might trip,” Nakazato mumbled, tugging at my sleeve. It made walking difficult, so I took his hand and said, “Here, hold this instead.”

Then Watarai took my other hand. “Me too — I’ll trip otherwise.”

“Then me too!” Horita said, grabbing Nakazato’s hand. And finally, Morizaki grabbed Horita’s.

What even *is* this.

Five high school guys walking hand-in-hand? That’s way too weird.

In the end, one of us almost tripped, and it ended up pulling everyone along, so we let go halfway down the path.

Still… it was kinda fun.

Once we changed out of the kimonos and stepped outside, I stretched my arms and loosened up my shoulders.

Ahh, nothing beats your own clothes.

The other four came out after me, and we all headed back to the bus.

“Tired!”

“Yeah, same. The rest is just the ride home anyway, so I’ll probably sleep through it.”

With a *thump*, Nakazato sank into his seat, and Morizaki leaned against the window with a sigh.

So that’s it, huh. Just a train ride back now.

Watching the scenery slip by outside the bus window, I felt a small pang of loneliness.

“Feeling sad?”

“Yeah… just a bit. It was fun.”

“I’m glad.”

Watarai seemed to read my mind when he asked, so I answered honestly. He smiled, looking a little relieved.

Of everyone here, Watarai's the one I got closest to—and probably the one who looked after me the most.

On the way to the station, time passed with Hirao-san talking at the front, students asking random questions now and then, just like on the first day.

□□□

When we arrived at the station, we said goodbye to Hirao-san and stepped off the bus. All the students gathered in front of the plaza, and the grade head teacher stood up front to explain what came next.

"Alright, we'll have a bathroom break now. If you're buying souvenirs, do it quickly and within the time limit! Don't forget the train schedule—meet back here twenty minutes before departure! Okay, dismissed!"

At his signal, the neat lines dissolved into chaos as everyone scattered in different directions. I opened the group chat with Tsujitani and the others and sent, "What kind of stuff are you guys buying?"

Hopefully they didn't forget about it.

"I'm gonna check out the souvenir shops. What about you guys?"

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and asked the four beside me. Watarai and Horita raised their hands. "I'm going too." Nakazato and Morizaki said, "We'll hit the bathroom first," so the two would meet us later. The three of us headed for the underground souvenir area of the station.

As we rode the escalator down, I was counting on my fingers who I needed to buy for when Watarai spoke up behind me.

"What are you doing?"

"Counting how many people I've gotta buy for."

"Sounds rough. You've got club people too, right?"

Horita peeked out from behind him, joining in.

"You guys aren't in any clubs?"

“Our club meets, like, once a month—if that.”

“Basically ghosts at this point. It’s fine.”

So that’s how it is for cultural clubs, huh.

I nodded with a casual “Huh,” as we stepped off the escalator and walked down aisles lined with souvenirs.

Yatsuhashi, matcha Baumkuchen, warabi mochi—

I looked through the glass displays.

Maybe castella for my family, since it’s easy to share. Warabi mochi for my grandparents? No, what if it gets stuck in their throat—better to go with a drinkable option. Maybe something in stick form...

While I was mulling it over, someone called out, “Hiyoki!” I looked up to see Watarai waving me over.

When I got there, carrying my bag of souvenirs, he and Horita both had something in their hands. Horita was chewing.

“They said we could sample this.”

Watarai held out something between a dorayaki and a manju, skewered on a toothpick. I wanted to take it, but both my hands were full.

As I hesitated, he said,

“Open your mouth.”

So he was gonna feed me.

I obediently went “Ah,” and opened my mouth.

He used his other hand to steady it and slipped it in.

I tilted my head back slightly and chewed.

Mmm. Sweet, nutty—tastes like kinako.

“How is it?”

“Good.”

Watarai tilted his head, and I nodded with my mouth still half full.

Maybe I'll get this for the club.

I thanked the shopkeeper and leaned forward to look at the showcase again, checking if there were other flavors.

Then I heard voices behind me.

"Tsukasa-nii, me too!"

"Me toooo!"

I turned around to see Nakazato and Morizaki standing there. They must've already shopped before meeting us—both were holding souvenir bags.

Wait—"Tsukasa"?

I glanced at Watarai, who had a deep frown between his brows. "Quit copying my brother." Since we always called each other by surnames, hearing a first name out of nowhere felt weird.

If it weren't for that thing yesterday morning, they probably wouldn't even know mine. …Actually, remembering that morning made me embarrassed all over again.

I quickly turned back to the showcase.

Yeah, I'll just buy this one for the club.

While Watarai and the others were still sampling, I went ahead and made my purchase.

"Can I set my bags here?"

"Of course~!"

The shopkeeper smiled as I set my souvenir bags on the counter. Should've done that from the start.

Pulling my phone out again, I opened the chat with Tsujitani and the others. "Matcha stuff~" "I'm going with yatsuhashi." "I want those candy things like konpeito." Good, no overlaps.

I sent a stamp and took out my wallet, turning to the clerk.

"I'll take the one I sampled earlier… and also the chocolate flavor, please."

“Thank you very much~”

As I paid, the clerk neatly packed everything into a paper bag and handed it over—with something extra.

“Here, I’ll throw this in as a freebie! Take it!”

“Thank you!”

I was putting my wallet away when the clerk handed me a maneki-neko keychain. I took it and looked it over.

When I gave it a little shake, it jingled softly.

As I was trying to juggle my bags — some hanging from my arm, others in my hands — Watari said, “I’ll take some,” and grabbed two or three of them. So this is what they call the charm of a popular guy.

I thanked him, checked the time, and headed toward the plaza.

While riding the escalator, I tugged on the hem of Watari’s uniform jacket in front of me.

“What’s up?”

“Give me your hand.”

“Huh? Why?”

Watari hesitated a little, but held out his hand.

I placed the maneki-neko keychain I’d just gotten into his palm.

“This is for your little brother.”

“Didn’t *you* get that, though?”

“I’d just lose it anyway… Give it to him for me, okay? Big brother Tsukasa.”

I smiled, remembering the exchange we had during the food tasting. Watari narrowed his eyes for a moment, then pulled his hand back, slipped the keychain into his pocket, and messed up my hair.

I’d actually taken time to style it, you know.

When he finally took his hand away, I shook my head like a dog.

“Cut that out. Just call me normally.”

“Watari?”

“Your *first* name.”

“Tsukasa.”

I did exactly what he asked, but Watari’s brow twitched. “Yeah, never mind. Let’s stick with last names for now.” He turned his face away.

What does he mean, *for now*?

Just like that kiss thing — my future apparently already has plans I didn’t make.

When we got back to the plaza, there were still about twenty minutes left. Some students hadn’t returned yet, and the teachers looked flustered. While waiting to move, the four of us started reminiscing about the trip.

“Can’t believe it’s really over.”

“It was fun.”

“What stuck out to you the most?”

“Uh… probably Nakazato’s little group.”

Nakazato elbowed Morisaki in the ribs.

Rubbing his side, Morisaki looked at me. “What about you, Hioki?”

Honestly, the entire three days had been great.

Even though we’d barely known each other before this trip, it felt like we’d been friends forever.

I thought for a moment.

“I liked everything, but I think the nights at the inn and hotel were the best — we got to really talk.”

It wasn’t much of an answer, but it was the truth.

Sorry for being boring.

Nakazato grinned when our eyes met.

“You *did* say you liked us.”

“…Wait, seriously?”

“Half joke, half truth,” Horita said.

Half and half? What does that even mean?

“Well, whatever. Both nights I slept great, too…”

“That’s because Watari took care of you both nights. Guess you two are compatible,” Morisaki teased.

Now that he mentioned it, I really did sleep beside Watari both nights.

“Maybe. It’s easy to relax next to him.”

Compatibility aside, that sense of comfort was undeniable — you’d get it if you tried sleeping next to him.

When I said that and looked at Watari, he quickly looked away. Huh. Guess it was just me who felt that way.

He’d been the one taking care of me, after all; maybe it was rough on his end.

“Did you hate it?”

“…I’m trying to savor the moment, so give me a sec.”

Savor *what* exactly?

Whatever it was, he seemed deep in thought, so I left him alone.

A moment later, the grade coordinator’s voice called out, “Everyone, we’re short on time, so move to the platform quickly!”

The teachers ushered us forward at a brisk pace.

Checking my phone, I saw the train would depart in about ten minutes. Yeah, that was cutting it close.

When we reached the platform, the shinkansen was already waiting. Our homeroom teacher stood by the doors, handing out tickets one by one.

“Sort out the seating once you’re inside—just get on for now!”

I was pushed along with the flow, checked my ticket, and found myself seated between Nakazato and Horita.

They both turned toward me.

“Welcome aboard~”

“Now that I think about it, this is the first time sitting next to you.”

True — I’d been next to Watari most of the time.

It felt oddly new.

“If your group’s missing anyone, report it! Also, don’t forget to grab your lunch boxes!” the teacher called out, walking down the aisle.

The carriage was lively, but it didn’t look like anyone was left behind. Right — lunch. We hadn’t eaten yet.

“Think it’s the Bakumatsu bento again?”

“Nah, no way.”

“I’ll go grab them.”

Nakazato got up and walked toward the back of the car. As I watched him go, Horita raised the blind and looked out the window.

“Did you have fun on the trip?”

“Yeah. Honestly, I thought I’d just be running errands for you guys, but it was actually really fun.”

“No way! Did we really seem like that kind of group?”

“We’d never talked before.”

“Hmm… fair point.”

Horita scratched his cheek with an awkward smile.

Still, it was thanks to him that I’d been included at all.

“Thanks for inviting me.”

“I wasn’t the one who came up with it, but you’re welcome anyway.”

Not his idea?

I'd assumed he invited me out of politeness because we'd gone to the same middle school, but apparently not.

"What do you mean—"

"Hey! Check it out, meat!" Nakazato yelled, drowning out my question.

Well, whatever. It was a great trip, that's all that mattered. He handed me a bento box, and I passed Horita's along before taking my own. Even through the lid, I could see the neat rows of juicy-looking meat.

"Looks good."

"Yeah. The makunouchi was fine, but meat always wins."

After handing out the last boxes to Watari and Morisaki, Nakazato sat down and broke apart his chopsticks.

"By the way, thanks for being our leader."

"…Huh? Where's this coming from?"

Nakazato froze halfway through opening his bento lid and looked at me in surprise. When our eyes met, his cheeks started turning red.

All I did was thank him normally, but maybe he's weak to straightforward sincerity. I hadn't expected *that* to make him blush, and somehow it made me feel embarrassed too.

"Don't blush, man…"

"Wha—! That's not it! You just said it outta nowhere!"

"Yeah yeah, come on, let's eat already."

Horita cut in, saying, "End of that topic," and started eating. I followed suit, placing a piece of meat on my rice so it wouldn't fall, then took a bite. Delicious.

While eating, we chatted about random things to smooth over Nakazato's sulky mood. Before long, the bento boxes were almost empty.

"That thing I said in the bath—about going to the beach—it wasn't a lie, you know."

“And let’s go to the summer festival too.”

Nakazato said that while wiping his hands with a wet tissue, looking cheerful again. Horita, tidying up his box on the other side, added,

“So, you’re still gonna hang out with us, right?”

“What? Of course I am. Wouldn’t it be messed up to ditch you guys after inviting me?”

“Then let’s eat lunch together too. Like, during P.E. breaks or lunchtime.”

I realized that sounded kinda rude after saying it, but neither of them seemed to care. Instead, they patted my head and shoulder like it was the most normal thing ever. At this rate, hanging around them is gonna mess up my sense of personal space.

“I’ll eat with you… if I don’t have club practice.”

“Man, that’s rough.”

“Wanna come cheer him on?”

“Please don’t. That’d be embarrassing.”

I shook my head while cleaning up.

They laughed and said, “Tryhard much?” and I couldn’t help but laugh too. But seriously, don’t show up. You two stand out way too much.

After tossing the trash and sipping the tea from the paper pack, I finally relaxed. How much longer till we arrived?

Maybe about three hours left?

When I opened my phone to check the time, I saw a notification from the chat app. It was a message from Ikegaya.

‘Tell me the daylog accounts of the hot guys you’re with.’

I had a feeling this was coming.

Maybe I should just say they refused… though I guess I should at least ask.

“Hey, um—so, my middle school classmate—the one we met at Shika’s place—wants your daylog accounts. Mind if I tell her?”

I started by asking the two on either side of me, Horita and Nakazato.

“It’s Ikegaya, right? I don’t mind.”

“Hmm… I guess I’m fine with it too, but I probably won’t follow her back. Don’t really know her.”

“Got it, thanks.”

With their permission, I turned around to ask Watari and Morisaki behind me.

“Uh, one of my middle school friends wants your daylog accounts. Is it okay if I tell her?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Ah… I don’t mind,” Morisaki said right away, while Watari hesitated before answering.

“Wait, if even one of us gives her our account, she could just find the others through the follow list, right? So it’s kinda pointless.”

“…Yeah, true.”

Nakazato turned to Morisaki. “He’s got a point.”

After a moment’s thought, Morisaki said, “Okay, fine. Go ahead and tell her.”

“Sorry about that. You don’t have to follow her back or anything.”

I thanked them and sat back down, then sent Ikegaya a reply. While typing, a question popped into my head.

“Is there anything you *can’t* do unless they follow you back?”

“Maybe you can’t DM them?” Horita answered.

So basically, unless you follow each other, you can’t talk outside of post comments. I closed my phone with a simple “Huh, makes sense.”

Looking out the window through the raised blinds, I noticed more and more familiar green scenery passing by.

□□□

“Alright, we’re almost at the station! If anyone’s asleep, wake them up! Help out your neighbors!”

Our homeroom teacher’s voice echoed through the calm train car. I forced myself out of the drowsy haze and checked on both sides. Not that I could move much—both of them had fallen asleep on my shoulders. Being in the middle seat is rough. My shoulders hurt.

I was trying to figure out how to wake them when someone behind me spoke.

“You okay there, Hioki?”

“I can’t move. Help, please.”

It was Watari. I gratefully accepted his offer.

He gently lifted Nakazato’s head off my shoulder while I shook Horita awake. Thankfully, Horita wasn’t too hard to wake up—it only took a few tries. I’d gotten used to waking Nakazato up too, so it didn’t take long before both were awake.

“When we get to the station, it’s dismissal! Don’t forget your belongings!”

The teacher’s announcement jolted me—I’d forgotten to message my sister. I quickly texted her our arrival time.

She replied almost instantly: ‘I’ll be there in about an hour.’ Feeling guilty, I closed my phone.

When the train stopped, we all filed out onto the platform. Apparently our suitcases had arrived earlier, and the staff were holding them for us. I thanked them and grabbed mine.

We gathered at the edge of the platform to avoid blocking the way, and the grade coordinator began to speak.

“Everyone, great work! This marks the end of the trip—but remember, the school trip isn’t over until you’re home, so no detours! Monday’s a substitute holiday, so take a rest, and we’ll see you back on Tuesday! Dismissed!”

“Thank youuu!” the students called out in chorus.

So that's it. The school trip's really over.

I still had about an hour to wait at the station, though. As I watched the others start to head off, Horita turned to me.

"My ride's already here, so I'm heading out. You guys good?"

"I'm taking the train, so I'll go too."

"Same here," Morisaki and Nakazato said, checking their phones for train times.

"My ride's not here yet, so I'll wait."

"Yeah, my train's later too," Watari added after checking his own time.

"See you Tuesday!"

"Later!"

"Yeah, see ya."

Horita walked off toward the exit, while Nakazato and Morisaki waved and headed for the trains.

I waved back, watching them disappear into the crowd. Once they were gone, I turned to Watari.

"How long until your train?"

"About twenty minutes, I think."

"Want me to give you a ride?"

"Nah, it's fine. I'm getting picked up at my local station."

"I see," I murmured, then looked around for an empty seat on the platform. Dragging my suitcase behind me, I sat down and finally said what I hadn't managed to earlier.

"Thanks for everything on the trip—the times I didn't have my glasses, the bath, when I got lost, carrying my souvenirs for me… all that."

My voice got smaller the more I remembered.

I really did cause a lot of trouble.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I should be thanking *you* for joining our group.”

His easy smile didn’t show an ounce of tiredness, and somehow, it made me smile back without thinking.

“I don’t really know why, but I feel like I got the closest to you, Watari.”

“…Do you?”

“At first, you were kinda cold.”

“That’s—uh, I just didn’t know how to greet you, or like, I was nervous, I guess.”

Watari rushed to explain, flustered.

I laughed and said, “I’m kidding,” just as an announcement echoed through the station. He’d said twenty minutes earlier, but considering the distance to the platform, maybe it was time for him to go.

“You should get going. Better to have some extra time. I’ll walk you to the gate.”

I stood up and started walking, suitcase in hand.

But Watari didn’t come up beside me, so I was just about to turn back when something grabbed my wrist.

“Wh—what’s wrong?”

Startled, I looked up at him.

“Hioki… do you remember when you went back to the inn to get your glasses?”

My glasses?

I dug through my memory—

Going back to grab them.

Almost tripping.

Watari catching me.

And me saying I'd do anything to repay him.

"...Y-yeah, I remember."

My voice trembled.

I didn't know what he was going to say next, but for some reason, I was scared to find out.

What if it was something like, *'Surprise, being nice to you was all a prank!'* Or, *'From next week, you have to do whatever I say.'* Or worse, *'You owe me money.'*

A swirl of thoughts spun in my head as I stared at Watari. If I found out all his kindness these past three days had been fake, I'd probably lock myself in my room for, like, three years.

"I was actually the one who suggested adding you to our group."

Watari started speaking.

The answer to the question I'd been too nervous to ask Horita.

"...R-really?"

"Yeah. Not 'cause I felt sorry for you being alone or anything. Well, maybe a *little* bit."

So there was a bit of that, huh.

I guess from the outside, it would look that way.

Being alone doesn't bother me.

But people *pitying* me for it—that's what stings.

"Honestly, at first I was just curious. You were always by yourself, and I never knew what you were thinking. But then I realized you could talk to anyone just fine."

How long has he been watching me?!

Embarrassed, I lowered my head.

"I thought maybe if we were in the same group, I could get to know you better."

His grip on my wrist tightened slightly.

“And on the trip, I got to see how funny you are, how thoughtful you can be… and, um— how cute you are. I’m really glad I got to learn all that.”

I lifted my head.

Watari’s cheeks were steadily turning red.

Wait.

Hold on.

Isn’t this… weird?

The air between us had grown soft and sweet, my chest light and fluttery—a feeling I’d never experienced before.

“I wasn’t planning to bring this up, but… well, I just wanted to say sorry, kinda.”

“No, I didn’t mind, really. That’s why I just let it be.”

When I said that, Watari looked me in the eyes and smiled gently.

The sweetness thickened, almost dizzying.

Wait.

This atmosphere… this *flow*…

“If it’s okay with you, Hioki…”

Watari’s grip on my wrist tightened even more.

I could only wait for his next words.

“...I want to be friends with you.”

Eh?

“F-friends?”

I sounded like some alien who’d just learned to communicate with humans. But seriously—what else was I supposed to think?

Because, come on—

That totally felt like a *confession*!

I don't even know why I'd started expecting something else, but the mood was so romantic that if you asked a hundred people, a hundred and twenty would've said, *"Yeah, that was a confession."*

So *this* was the true power of Watari—the one everyone in the reviews said "gives you the wrong idea."

Terrifying.

Friends, huh… friends…… wait,

"Sorry…"

The word slipped out before I could stop it.

Watari's eyebrows dipped, looking a little hurt.

Crap. Wrong wording.

"N-no! Not that kind of sorry! I mean—uh, I already kinda thought we were friends, so… sorry for *that*."

I had no idea what I was saying anymore.

I mean, where does "friend" even *start*?

No one's ever said "Let's be friends!" to me before.

I always thought it just sort of… happened naturally.

While I was still sweating nervously, Watari's grip shifted—from my wrist to my palm. It was a familiar touch.

He'd held my hand like this so many times before.

My confused brain slowly began to calm down.

Stop relaxing, seriously.

"I'm really glad to hear that, but…"

"…Yeah?"

"It's just—like, if you ever want to hang out, I want to be the first one you ask. And if you ever need help, I want to be the first one you rely on."

“Oh… that kind of…”

He had a point.

When I thought about who I’d call first to hang out or ask for help, Tsujitani and the others came to mind before him.

So that’s what he meant by “friends.”

I nodded, taking a slow breath to steady myself, then tightened my grip on his hand.

“Um… looking forward to being friends, then.”

“Yeah, same here.”

Watari’s smile shone brighter than ever before, and I couldn’t help smiling back.

The station announcement echoed overhead, and the crowd began flowing toward the platform.

I’d been so focused on him, I hadn’t noticed how busy it had gotten.

“You should probably get going now.”

“Yeah.”

His reply was so soft I couldn’t tell if he’d even heard me. When I let go of his hand, he suddenly reached up and cupped my ear.

“Your ear’s bright red. Cute.”

Whose fault do you think that is?!

I pulled his hand away, muttering, “You’ll miss your train,” and glanced toward the ticket gates.

“See you,” Watari said, lifting his suitcase again before walking off. At the turnstile, he looked back one last time, waving cheerfully. I waved back and stood there until he disappeared from view.

There were still more than thirty minutes until my sister came to pick me up. I headed outside to cool down both my flushed face and overheated brain.

Three months into my second year,

I made a new friend.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

WATARAI IS SO FREAKYYYYYYYYYYY

“Alright, everyone, move to the gym quickly, okay?”

Leaving those words behind, our homeroom teacher walked out of the classroom.

The sound of chairs scraping filled the room as everyone stood up. I grabbed my pencil case and the travel booklet, ready to head out, when a voice called from behind me.

“Hey, Hioki—let’s go together.”

I turned around to see Watari jogging up to me.

Oh, right.

We’re friends now.

Guess I’ve gotten so used to moving around alone that my body just automatically does it.

“You’re terrible for leaving us behind!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Nakazato puffed his cheeks in mock anger, so I gave him a quick apology.

“Ugh, cringe.”

“Morozaki-kun, that’s mean.”

When Morozaki muttered that, Nakazato stayed in character and pretended to cry dramatically.

“Anyway, let’s get going already.”

Checking his watch, Hotta started walking.

Break time was only ten minutes—gone in a blink.

We followed after him toward the shoe lockers.

The annoying part was that we had to swap to our gym shoes first.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just leave our shoes at the gym?”

“With every student in school? No way that’d fit.”

Nakazato sighed as Watari answered him.

The gym was on the opposite side of the building, so yeah, it was a pain.

Lockers banged open one after another.

Mine was on the lower row, so I crouched to pull my shoes out. Would be nice if I could move up just two tiers.

“Man, I wish we could choose our locker spots.”

Morozaki grumbled beside me as he crouched down for his shoes too. Couldn’t agree more.

“Taller people should get the top ones.”

“Yeah, alphabetical order by attendance number sucks.”

As we headed down the stairs toward the gym, Hotta started chatting, and Nakazato nodded along.

We had to pass through the first-year hallway since the stairway from the second-year floor was closed for repairs.

The hall was crowded with students, buzzing with chatter.

“……”

I glanced ahead at the four walking in front of me.

Maybe it was their aura or something, but we’d been drawing a *lot* of stares. Girls were gathering by the hallway windows, whispering and giggling.

“Ah, Hioki-senpai! Hello!”

“Heya~!”

Just as I tried to put a little distance between myself and the group, two first-year boys called out to me.

I turned to see my club juniors bowing politely.

There were ten new members, so honestly, I still didn’t have everyone’s names memorized. Sorry.

“Hey, good work. Heading to your next class?”

“Yes! To the music room!”

“Are you moving too, senpai?”

“Yeah, the gym. We’ve got some post–field trip thing… oh—I'll bring your souvenirs later.”

“Really!? Thank you so much!”

“Can’t wait!”

“Yeah, see you later.”

I waved as we parted ways.

The second I mentioned “souvenirs,” their eyes practically sparkled. Even though we’ve only been in the same club for about two and a half months, they’re already kinda adorable.

“Friends of yours?”

“My juniors in club.”

“Hmm.”

Watari, now walking beside me, glanced back at them after I answered. Was he… curious or something?

“Hello, senpai~!”

“Hi, senpai! Where are you guys off to?”

Before I could ask, the other four were getting called to by a group of girls.

“...We’re headed to the gym.”

“Oh, okay! Good luck!”

“See you at club!”

When Nakazato answered, the girls flushed, giggling and whispering as they ran off. You’ll get scolded for running in the hallway, you know.

As I turned forward again, the guys started mumbling:

“Who were those?”

“No idea, who?”

“I don’t know either.”

“Seriously, who?”

...I’m so sorry, girls.

I silently apologized in my heart.

I wanted to scold them for not remembering, but since I still can’t recall all my own juniors’ names, I held my tongue and just kept walking.

Once we slipped on our gym shoes and entered the gym, I noticed a large screen set up at the front.

A video, maybe?

Before I could think further, our grade head’s voice came through the mic.

“Alright, line up by class, boys and girls separate! Class 1, over here!”

As lines started forming, I headed toward where Class 5 was gathering, standing in attendance order.

Since it was by gender, Hotta ended up right behind me.

“What do you think they’ll show?”

“No clue… maybe a ‘Field Trip MVP’ award or something?”

He sounded just as curious as I was, so I gave a half-joking answer.

“The MVP’s definitely the grade head.”

“Ha! True.”

We both chuckled, remembering the teacher’s morning wake-up announcements from the trip.

If that footage got shown, we were doomed.

Our “MVP” of a grade head adjusted the mic, and the assembly began.

“Everyone, great job on the field trip! Did you all get some rest? Midterms are coming soon, so let’s do our best!”

Midterms… right.

Talk about a mood crash after a fun trip.

The air was thick with collective groans.

“Today, we’ll be watching a field trip highlight movie, made by the photo studio that accompanied us! After that, we’ll go over some updates. Please focus on the screen! If you can’t see well from the back, feel free to move closer.”

Once he moved aside, the students surged toward the front. I was about to follow when Nakazato and Hotta grabbed my arms.

“Let’s just watch from the back.”

“Huh? But we won’t see anything—wait, hey, my pants—stop dragging me!”

Before I knew it, they’d hauled me back near Watari and Morozaki, who were sitting cross-legged.

Then Nakazato, grinning, said “Here, take him,” and plopped me right between Watari’s legs.

Why.

I was now, somehow, leaning against Watari like he was a human chair. Guess I’ve been reincarnated as a seat cushion.

When I tried to move, Watari murmured, “You can stay like that,” and wrapped an arm around my stomach, pulling me closer.

He stretched out his legs and leaned back on his hands. Well… if he says it’s fine. I slid down slightly, waiting for the movie to start.

The teachers on the second floor closed the curtains, and the gym dimmed to darkness. Upbeat music played as a shot of the sky appeared, with the trip dates written across the screen.

It was surprisingly well-made.

The volume dipped, and the grade head appeared on screen.

“So, sensei, how do you feel about this trip?”

“Well, I’ve done this so many times it feels like my second home by now!”

The students burst out laughing at his deadpan delivery.

Then came a montage of travel scenes and clips from the first day’s *Noh* theater performance. Ah, right. We went there.

Seeing that reminded me of when Watari helped me afterward. They didn’t film us holding hands, right?

I was silently panicking until the scene shifted to dinner. Thank god.

Day Two began—class-by-class footage.

No morning wake-up call, thank heaven.

Judging by the sighs of relief from Nakazato and the others, I wasn’t the only one thinking that.

Next came group photos and sightseeing shots.

At one point, Ino appeared grinning ear to ear next to a local mascot character, which made me laugh out loud.

Then came our class’s group photo—*that* one. Probably the first photo they took.

My face looked way too happy.

Ugh. Embarrassing.

Just when I thought it was over, the footage switched to our free time, showing different groups exploring a shopping street or playing in a retro arcade. I leaned forward slightly, curious—until the screen suddenly showed me holding a little boy.

Excuse me, who gave permission for *that* photo!?

I instinctively leaned back, bonking my head against Watari's chest.

"Sorry!"

"It's fine. Congrats on your solo feature."

He chuckled, patting my head.

Yeah, no, not "congrats."

The others caught my eye and smirked, chiming in with "Congrats~." Please stop.

The image changed again, thankfully.

Still, my palms were sweating.

Please, please don't let Tsujitani and the others in club see that.

Then came Day Three—the final day.

Each class's group photo flashed by, most with veteran older female tour guides. When Class 5's turn came, the guys from other classes started whining, "Not fair!" "Lucky bastards!"

Damn right.

I couldn't help a smug little laugh.

Next were the shots of everyone in kimono.

As soon as we appeared, the girls in the gym started whispering and squealing. Some even glanced over at us.

Oh no.

If they notice I'm leaning on Watari, his fan club will *end* me. I tried to inch down further, but he pulled me back again, arm snug around my waist.

"You'll miss the view if you sink that low."

"It's not about the view! It's about *survival*! My life's on the line here."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

He just muttered that quietly, keeping his arm where it was while focusing on the screen again.

Honestly, he was too close now… but whatever.

I gave up and leaned into him.

The final scenes rolled—thank-you messages from the hotel and inn staff—and then the credits.

When the teachers reopened the curtains, sunlight flooded in. It was blinding, so I raised a hand to shield my eyes—only for Watari to cover them gently with his palm.

“Whoa—what are you doing?”

“Dunno. Felt like it.”

“Hey, quit flirting!”

“Time to head back!”

“I’ll drag you if I have to!”

Morozaki and Hotta’s voices cut through as they stood. Hotta grabbed my arm, helping me up.

My vision was still flickering from the light as I stood and moved back to my spot.

“Alright! The photos you saw in the movie are available for purchase! We’ll hand out order envelopes later—write down the photo numbers and bring them back *with money,* okay? *With money!*”

The grade head’s voice faded into background noise.

I probably wouldn’t buy any.

If my parents found out, though, they’d definitely order a few.

“Now, everyone should have your trip booklets. You’ve written your reflections for all three days, right? We’ll be collecting them by class!”

A wave of groans spread through the gym.

Judging by the noise, most people hadn’t finished.

I'd remembered this morning and scribbled mine down in a panic. My handwriting looked like a worm army—it'd probably get rejected.

Seeing the chaos, the grade head sighed.

"Anyone not done, stay and finish before returning to class! At least eighty percent completed, okay?"

He went on to talk about midterms and future plans, then checked with the other teachers for announcements.

"Our next announcement is for modern Japanese! The test range has been expanded, so the workbook pages you'll need to submit have changed. Make sure to check the updated handout carefully!"

The modern lit teacher's voice echoed through the mic—exactly the kind of news no one wanted to hear.

A few scattered groans of "Eeeeh…" rippled through the room.

"Alright, that's all! Other grades are still in class, so please move quietly. And if you haven't finished writing your trip reflections in your booklet, do that before leaving!"

With that, the grade supervisor wrapped things up.

Some students stood up chatting noisily, while others sat down again to scribble in their booklets.

When I turned around, Hotta looked completely deflated.

"You didn't write yours?"

"Yeah… I forgot."

Nakazato dragged himself over with a resigned "yeah, yeah" and plopped down next to me, opening his pencil case.

"I only wrote 'It was fun' for day two. What did we even do that day again?"

"Day two was… oh right, all your new friends."

"Ah, right—my deer buddies."

Hotta answered, and apparently he'd already come to terms with it—he was calling them his friends now.

Nakazato started scribbling smoothly.

“Anyone got a pen I can borrow?”

“Can I copy yours?”

Soon Watarai and Morisaki joined us, forming a little circle as we all worked on our reflections.

When Watarai caught my eye, I handed him my mechanical pencil.

“So you’re a 0.5 person, huh?”

He took it, inspecting the tiny engraved “0.5” on the barrel.

“What do you mean, a 0.5 person?”

“The lead size. I’m a 0.3 guy,” Morisaki said, grabbing my booklet as he spoke.

I’d given up on 0.3 ages ago since it broke so easily—but hey, don’t just take my stuff without asking.

“Wait, I can’t even read this. Did you study ancient hieroglyphs or something?”

“Haha! In a way, yeah—you kinda did!”

Morisaki opened my reflection page and tried his best to decode my handwriting, while Nakazato peeked over his shoulder laughing.

“Hey, that’s the fruit of my morning effort, you know.”

“Then rewrite it before they hand it back.”

Watarai plucked the booklet from Morisaki’s hands and passed it back to me. Figures. I sighed, took out my eraser and pencil, and started fixing it up. In the end, all five of us were sitting there writing together.

Then a familiar voice cut through the chatter.

“Haven’t any of you in this group finished yet?”

I looked up—and there was the grade supervisor, standing over us with arms crossed like a guardian statue.

The chorus of voices chimed in perfect unison.

“““““Sooorryyy!”””””

The four of them mumbled their apology, still staring at their booklets with not a trace of remorse.

Come on, at least look the man in the eye.

I gave a quick bow to the grade supervisor and went back to rewriting my reflection.

“What a handful you sunflowers are,” he muttered, before heading off to check on other students.

Wait—he remembered us?

“The grade supervisor totally knows who we are now.”

“What do we do, make fan merch next time?”

“Let’s write ‘Wake me up with a morning call!’ on ours.”

“Our debut song’ll be *Sunflower*.”

As Hotta and the others chatted while writing, I couldn’t help but sigh. Great—apparently we’re an idol group now.

I closed my finished booklet and looked up at the supervisor again. He was the textbook image of a sports-type teacher, and somehow I ended up picturing him dancing under sparkling stage lights.

Ugh. Why did I even imagine that?

While waiting for the other four to finish, I was zoning out when a voice came from above.

“Mind if I borrow Hioki for a sec?”

I looked up to see Minase grinning down at me.

At the same time, someone nudged my back with their knee, so I stood up.

“I’ll be right back.”

“…Three seconds,” Watarai said, glancing at Minase before speaking

in a flat tone.

Yeah, sure. Be reasonable, dude.

“I’ll try,” I said, and followed Minase toward the exit.

“Man, Hioki! Don’t go hanging out in intimidating places like that!”

As soon as we were a bit away from Watarai and the others, Minase slung an arm over my shoulder and whispered.

Right back at you, buddy.

“They’re my friends, can’t help it.”

“Still, look—my hands are *still shaking!*”

He pulled his arm away and held his hand up dramatically. It wasn’t shaking so much as flapping around.

I couldn’t help laughing.

“That’s a bit much.”

“How do you even hang around people that good-looking without imploding?”

“They’re not *that* unapproachable, are they?”

“Eh… maybe it’s just that they feel like they’re from another dimension or something. I dunno.”

Minase shrugged.

Honestly, that was exactly how I’d felt about Watarai and his group at first. You talk to them once, though, and they turn out to be good guys.

Near the entrance, Tsujitani and Ino were waiting.

“Hey, look who showed up—the honorary extrovert trainee!”

“Man, give us a break. We decided with rock-paper-scissors who’d come get you.”

“You could’ve just come together, you know.”

I tossed the suggestion out as they grumbled.

Would've been less scary that way.

"With the three of us, our combined power level's like, thirty tops."

"And we don't even have weapons!"

"Even adding you in only makes it twenty."

"Why'd it go down!?"

I shot back, and we all cracked up.

It was a different vibe from hanging with Watarai and the others, but this kind of easy banter felt good too.

Wait—why *did* they even call me over?

"So what'd you need me for?"

"Oh, right! We're trying to decide who's taking which class their souvenirs."

"Ah, right… oh crap, I already told a first-year I'd bring theirs later."

"Then Hioki, you take the first-years too."

Ino threw out the idea, and I nodded. "Got it."

"Okay, Hioki and Ino take the first-years, me and Tsujitani'll handle the third-years," Minase said quickly, keeping things organized.

The other two nodded in agreement.

"Then I'll do classes 1 through 3, and Hioki, you take 4 through 6."

"Got it."

Simple enough.

I tried to recall which juniors were in classes 4–6, but then Tsujitani suddenly exclaimed, "Crap! I forgot to do the homework for next period!"

"Dude, what are you doing!? Go!"

"Farewell, Tsujitani! You'll be missed!"

Smooth, real smooth—completely abandoning him like that. We

watched him sprint out of the gym before Ino stretched and said, “Guess we should split too.”

Minase followed, and I was about to join them when I remembered—I had to go back.

“Alright, see you at club.”

“Yeah, later!”

“Good luck, Mr. Extrovert Trainee!”

I waved, and they waved back with big grins before heading toward the main building. Seriously, what even is an “extrovert trainee”?

Heading back into the gym, I made my way toward Watarai and the others. They had to be done writing by now.

Most of the students were already gone.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Oh, it’s fine—we already turned in your booklet with ours. That okay?”

“What, really? Thanks!”

Hotta looked up as he said it, and I made sure to thank him. Saved me some trouble. Watarai stood and handed me my pencil case.

“Thanks for the pen.”

“Sure, no problem.”

I took it back, and Nakazato and the others got up too. We were just about to head out when a teacher called out.

“Nakazato’s group, sorry—but can you check that all the windows are locked?”

Our homeroom teacher pointed toward them.

Probably a safety thing, even though club activities were about to start.

“Got it!”

Nakazato turned back to us. “So, upper or lower floor?” Before anyone could answer, the teacher called again.

“Ah, wait! Hioki, you’re in one of the indoor clubs, right? Can you take these up to the broadcast room for me?”

She held out a microphone and a screen remote.

“Sure. Should I lock up the broadcast room afterward?”

“Oh, right! Sorry—yes, please take this too.”

She fumbled through her keyring and handed me one.

“I’ll collect them back in the classroom later, so no need to go to the staff room.”

“Okay.”

Turning back to the others, I said, “Looks like I’m heading upstairs.”

“Then I’ll go with you,” Watarai said, taking the mic and remote from me.

“Guess that means we’re on window duty downstairs,” Morisaki said, and he, Nakazato, and Hotta scattered.

We started climbing the stairs, passing another teacher halfway up.

“Already checked upstairs, so you’re good.”

“Thanks, we just have to drop these off in the broadcast room.”

“Appreciate it!”

I nodded toward the mic and remote in Watarai’s hands, and the teacher smiled before heading down.

At the top, we crossed the gallery and stepped into the broadcast room.

“Ever been here before?”

“Nope, first time.”

I asked as I took the mic and remote back from Watarai. He shook his head, eyes darting curiously around.

Not that I was much more familiar—this was only my second time here.

I opened the built-in cabinet to put the mic away.

Now… where was the remote supposed to go again?

I was still looking around when Watarai spoke up.

“What were you talking about earlier?”

“Earlier? Oh, just the souvenirs for the club.”

I replied while opening a drawer.

Man, between asking about the juniors and my friends, he’s been awfully curious lately. Not that I mind—nothing to hide, really.

“What’s wrong? Jealous or something?”

I teased him lightly, keeping my tone playful as I stashed the remote. It’s not like he’d actually get lonely without me around, right?

“…Yeah.”

Wait—what?

It was such a soft voice, it would’ve been drowned out if anyone else were around. But it was just the two of us, and I heard him clearly.

I turned around in surprise.

Watarai’s face was hidden in the backlight.

When I stepped forward to close the drawer, my foot caught on a cable and I stumbled—

Déjà vu.

Watarai caught me before I fell.

Do I have some kind of clumsy-god haunting me or what? I should’ve gotten purified on the school trip. Seriously.

“Sorry. Thanks…”

I tried to push away, but instead, he pulled me in tighter.

What the hell's gotten into him?

Then, right beside my ear, he whispered something.

"…because…"

"Huh?"

I strained to catch it.

"…because I was lonely, so let me recharge a bit."

His arms tightened again.

Okay, seriously—what's going on here?

Our bodies were so close, I could feel the strong rhythm of his heartbeat through his chest. We were nearly the same height, but somehow, being held by him made him feel so much bigger.

Is this what they call "embracing energy"?

Without thinking, my arms wrapped around his back in return. The sense of calm was overwhelming—it could get addictive.

"Do friends even do stuff like this?"

"…Hugging's fine between friends, isn't it?"

"Not when it lasts *this* long."

"That's only for you, Hioki."

Reluctantly, he finally let go, his expression glowing with satisfaction even through the fading backlight.

"What do you think about friends kissing?"

"That's a no."

I covered my mouth instinctively, half-joking, half-serious. He chuckled. "Relax, I said not *yet.*"

Still doesn't make it better, dude.

I shot him a flat stare, and he just smirked, jingling the key as he

walked out of the room. I exhaled once, then followed him.

He waited until I stepped out before locking the door behind us.

“Hey, hurry up already!”

Nakazato’s voice called from downstairs.

Everyone else was gone.

We hurried down the stairs.

“You’re late! What were you doing?”

At the entrance, Morisaki asked as he switched from gym shoes to sandals.

How was I supposed to answer that?

If I said we were hugging, I’d probably get suspended for “misconduct.”

“Hioki got tangled in a cable, so we had to sort it out,” Watarai explained as we walked.

Technically, my foot did get caught—but “tangled” was a stretch. Still, I nodded along.

“Oh, you klutz!” Nakazato said, smacking my shoulder in exaggerated scolding. What even is this character arc you’ve got going on?

“So, what’s our next class?”

Hotta ignored him and changed the subject.

Good question. I couldn’t remember either.

While we were mumbling, “What was it again?” a voice came from behind us.

“Next is P.E.”

We turned around—it was the grade supervisor.

At the same time, the bell rang, signaling the end of fifth period.

“If you don’t get changed and head to the field fast, you’ll be getting *special lessons,* just your group.”

He grinned and walked off toward the staff room.

We just stood there, watching him go.

“…”

A few silent seconds passed.

“Wait—we’re still in our uniforms, aren’t we?”

Watarai’s words sank in, and suddenly it was like someone broke a spell. We all bolted for the classroom.

“Crap, he’ll make us run extra laps!”

“Or worse, make us demonstrate in front of everyone!”

“Please don’t make me pair with the grade supervisor!”

“Should we just start undressing while we run!?”

We sprinted down the hallway, laughing and shouting.

From behind came a teacher’s voice:

“Don’t run in the hallways!”

We apologized frantically as we dashed up the stairs.

The goal: reach the field before the grade supervisor did.

Ten minutes left until sixth period.

And in the now-empty gym, the sound of cicadas echoed—the first sign of summer’s arrival.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

WATARAI IS SO FREAKY AND HIOKI IS SO CLUELESS AKSJDHKASDHJHADS

IT'S A CONFESSION TIME AND THANKS TO MY LOVE

WENZHOUBIRTHEDME FOR LISTENING TO ME SCREAMING WHILE

TRANSLATING

『We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience caused. When exiting the train, please do not stop near the doors—』

The announcement echoed through the carriage.

I tore my eyes away from the scenery outside and glanced down at my phone screen—the same lock screen I'd already checked at least five times.

(I was supposed to get there ten minutes early…)

A small sigh escaped me.

Delays aren't something you can control, but the guilt still hits hard. I turned my body toward the door, ready to get off as soon as it opened. The train gradually slowed, then came to a stop with a soft *pshht* as the doors slid open.

People poured out in a steady stream.

I followed suit, stepping down onto the platform.

(Ugh, this heat is disgusting.)

The air was suffocating—thick, heavy, and stifling.

It was a little past two in the afternoon, and the temperature was probably peaking. The sudden jump from air-conditioned comfort to oven-hot platform air made me a bit dizzy, but I pushed through, heading down the stairs at a quick pace.

Weaving through the crowd, I exited the ticket gates and aimed for the south exit. As I walked, I opened the chat app and typed rapidly with my thumb.

Sorry I'm late. Where are you guys right now?

The message whooshed away.

They'd probably see it right away.

I waited for the read receipt to pop up, but before it did, sunlight spilled across my shoes. I stopped walking right at the edge where shadow met light, then stepped back into the shade of a nearby pillar.

There was no way I could stand out there on the shimmering asphalt under that kind of heat. Still, waiting in the shade while being late didn't exactly feel right either.

"…"

I stared down at my phone.

Four people in the group, and not a single one had read the message yet. Maybe they were busy talking, or just not looking at their phones.

If messaging wasn't working, maybe I should just call. I closed the group chat and opened my friends list.

Scrolling through the names, I searched for someone I could call without it being weird.

Just as my thumb hovered over the call button—

"Hey, you got a sec?"

"Eh—"

I looked up and froze.

No, *not* froze—*locked up*. For several seconds.

(Wh—what the hell…)

If I had to sum him up in one word: *yakuza*. Tall, broad shoulders, the kind of presence that screamed *don't mess with me*. And when I averted my gaze, I caught a glimpse of the tattoos on his arm.

Wait—no way. A real one?!

My breath hitched. My lungs forgot how to work.

I just stood there like a frog facing a snake, unable to move.

"You friends with Naoya?"

"Huh… Naoya?"

"Yeah—Morozaki Naoya."

The man pressed a finger to the wireless earbud in his ear, smirking faintly.

Oh.

My brain, oddly calm despite the panic, pieced it together. He already *knew* I was friends with Morozaki. This wasn't a question—it was a confirmation. Which meant there was really only one answer I could give.

"…Yeah. We're friends."

"Right. Well, him and a few others—looks like they messed up."

"Messed… up?"

"Yeah. Three other guys about his age."

That… could only mean one group.

My group.

What did they do?!

I couldn't even speak—just gave a weak nod.

"Word is, you were supposed to meet up with them today, yeah?"

"…Yeah."

"Sorry, kid. You know what *collective responsibility* means, right? You're coming with me."

Oh god.

I'm going to die.

My brain scrambled to process everything—the conversation, what it implied, and what was coming next.

My vision swam.

My eyes stung.

Wait… am I about to cry?

"…Come on, move."

He gestured toward a white van nearby.

My throat clenched. Was *that* where the others were?

Rubbing at my eyes, I nodded and followed.

The passenger-side window rolled down.

"Well, well. You're Hiyoki, huh? Cute face you've got there."

The guy inside had piercings, bleached milk-tea hair, and an easy, lazy grin. The kind of grin that made you feel smaller just looking at it. His sunglasses hid his eyes completely.

"It's hot out—get in."

When I didn't answer, he shut the window again.

The tattooed man opened the back door for me.

"…Huh?"

I'd expected to see everyone else inside—but the seats were empty.

Where were they?

No way…

A chill ran down my spine.

"Go on, get in. Don't worry—they're still alive."

That didn't make me feel any better.

Still, I lifted one heavy foot after another and sat down.

The sunglasses guy turned to face me.

“So, Hiyoki—anything you wanna say first?”

In his hand, he was holding a smartphone.

Recording?

Like… a final message?

Something I want to say.

What *did* I want to say?

I wanted to ask where Morozaki and the others were, what they’d done, whether they were okay.

But he’d said “anything you wanna *say*,” not “ask.” Maybe I only got one sentence.

Then… there was only one thing I *had* to say.

“Um…”

My voice trembled.

He smirked, tilting his head. “Yeah?”

I took a deep breath.

“I… I’d like to… call my family.”

That broke me.

The word “family” brought my mom’s face to mind—her waving goodbye this morning. Tears streamed down before I could stop them, dropping onto my knees and soaking my jeans.

“Aww, he’s crying already?”

The sunglasses guy said it lightly, almost amused, just as a phone started ringing in the car. The tattooed man picked up.

I didn’t know who was on the other end—someone to help me, or someone worse. I bit my lip and tried to muffle my sobs.

“No good, huh?”

“Yeah, figures. Open the door.”

The sunglasses guy pocketed his phone and nodded at the driver.

No good…?

No good *what*?

Was he talking about *them*?

Were they—

More tears spilled before I could stop them.

“Hiyoki!”

A voice I knew—clear, panicked—called out.

Before I could even look up, someone yanked me forward into a dark blur.

“Crap, I’m so sorry—sorry, Hiyoki!”

Watarai’s arms wrapped around me tight, his hand rubbing my back.

“Damn, that was too much.”

“Seriously, Hiyoki, we’re sorry! You’re not dying, promise!”

“We didn’t mean to freak you out that bad, we swear!”

Morozaki’s voice, and the others behind him.

My brain stopped.

Everything—the fear, the confusion—melted into stunned silence.

“Naoya, you didn’t tell me you *already introduced* him?”

“I showed you a picture! Doesn’t mean you’d remember! Plus you’re wearing sunglasses, of course he didn’t recognize you!”

I heard both the voice of the guy with sunglasses and Morisaki’s voice. Wait… did he just say *“aniki”* (brother)? Are those two… related?

My brain, finally starting to function again, tried to make sense of it

all. Then Watarai's voice came from above me.

"Hiyoki, remember? At the school trip barbecue, we saw pictures of Morisaki's brothers."

School trip, barbecue, Morisaki brothers…

My brain ran a quick search.

And then—

"…Ah."

A small sound escaped me.

I remembered.

And at the same time, I understood the situation.

…So I'd been tricked.

I pushed away from Watarai's chest and sat up.

I hastily wiped the tears off my face with the back of my hand and saw the four of them looking at me with worried expressions.

Then I turned toward the driver's seat and the passenger side— and locked eyes with the man smiling at me after taking off his sunglasses.

"Hiyoki-kun, is there anything you'd like to say?"

The same words as before.

But this time, they meant something completely different. I took a small breath and spoke exactly what I was thinking.

"…Can I go home now?"

I sniffled loudly, and the man—Morisaki's older brother, apparently— burst out laughing.

"Once again, I'm Naoya's older brother, Ryoto. Nice to meet you."

He introduced himself in the convenience store parking lot. Without the sunglasses, Ryoto really did look related to Morisaki. A handsome brother really does make for another handsome brother. He reached

out his hand, so I shook it with both of mine.

“I’m Asahi Hiyoki.”

“Naoya’s always in your care, man～.”

“Ah, no, it’s fine.”

When I tried to pull my hand back, he squeezed it tighter and shook it up and down. He seemed a lot more easygoing than his brother.

When I looked up, hoping he’d finally let go, Ryoto turned his face toward the convenience store doors.

“And this guy’s Shion—‘heart’ and ‘warmth’ as in ‘warm-hearted’. Pretty funny name, right?”

…Not funny at all.

I followed his gaze to see Shion walking out of the automatic doors. Even after seeing him a few times, his presence was still *intense*. He rummaged through a convenience store bag, pulled out a bottled water, and handed it to me.

“I’m Tachibana Shion. Nice to meet you.”

“Asahi Hiyoki. Nice to meet you, too.”

What, did all the *kindness* in his name get stolen from his appearance or something? If I said that out loud, I’d probably end up at the bottom of the ocean, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Thank you for the water.”

I took it and bowed my head.

Shion placed his large hand on my head and gave it a light pat.

“Sorry about earlier.”

“…It’s okay.”

His voice was softer this time than when he’d approached me at the station. Maybe that whole act had been on Ryoto’s instructions.

“You were *so* cute when you started crying. For me, Hiyoki wins the prize.”

Ryoto threw in a weird compliment.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Not even a little bit comforting.

When he said, “Alright, let’s go,” he and Shion started walking toward the van, and I followed behind.

Honestly, I *did* want to go home, but the other four—mostly Watarai—begged me to stay, so I reluctantly agreed.

If this had been before the school trip, I’d have gone straight home and cut ties with them all. Judging by their personalities, the mastermind behind this whole prank was… yeah, 100% Ryoto.

Once we got in the car, I sat down in the back seat. Watarai, sitting beside me, looked over with concern.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“…Thanks for not going home.”

“…Yeah.”

As we talked, Watarai gently brushed the corner of my still slightly swollen eyes. I hadn’t done anything wrong, but the look on his face was so apologetic that *I* felt like apologizing instead.

When he finally withdrew his hand, I opened the bottle of water Shion had given me and took a long sip to calm myself down.

“It’ll be about an hour and a half till we get there,”

Ryoto’s voice came from the passenger seat as the car started moving. I clicked my seatbelt in place and turned to look out the window. The view was still filled with green— in an hour and a half, it would all be tinted blue.

“Shion-san! Can we eat snacks?”

Nakazato called out from the back, and Shion replied briefly, “Yeah.” Getting permission, Nakazato opened a box, the sound of packaging rustling. He turned around.

“Here, Hiyoki.”

“Thanks.”

“A peace offering.”

He handed me a piece of chocolate.

I tossed it into my mouth. The taste was both sweet and bitter. Ugh, dark chocolate—of course.

I’d noticed during the school trip, but Nakazato must really not like sweets.

After handing out the chocolates, Morisaki spoke up.

“You know, that prank? We did it to *everyone*, not just you.”

“…Oh, really.”

What kind of insane “rite of passage” was that?

I glanced over at Watarai and Hotta—both nodded in agreement.

“The others were asking stuff like what Naoya did, or how they could make it out alive. But you, Asahi—you said you wanted to call your family. That was adorable!”

Ryoto grinned and shot a look at Shion in the driver’s seat, who nodded wordlessly. Please just forget about that… though this whole thing was *their* fault to begin with.

Embarrassed, I lowered my head, but Ryoto’s voice came again.

“Most baby-like of all—you win in my book.”

Could someone please just throw this man out of the car? I turned toward Morisaki. He noticed and, turning slightly in his seat, shrugged.

“That’s just how he is.”

Yeah. Definitely adding Ryoto to my *people I’m bad with* list.

“Don’t tease Hiyoki too much,” Hotta said. “He’s so pure, he practically short-circuits when someone says his name.”

“Wait—what’s that about short-circuiting?” Ryoto asked.

Great.

Because of those two, Ryoto perked right up again.

They both shot me an *‘oops’* look, but clearly he wasn’t going to let it go.

I sighed and said, “You can tell him.”

Hotta hesitated, then started explaining what happened that morning of the second day.

When he finished, Ryoto gave a simple, amused “Heh~” and turned back around.

If my first impression of Morisaki was *bad attitude, foul mouth*, then my first impression of his brother was *bad personality*.

I sink back into my seat, wishing everyone would forget what just happened, and glance out the window.

The tilting sun paints the asphalt orange.

It looks like we still have a little while before we arrive.

□□□

“We’re here~!”

“The sea~!”

Nakasato and Hotta stretch as the sea breeze washes over them. I follow, stepping out of the car and feeling the soft ground beneath my feet — an extension of the beach.

“Evening’s cooler, right?”

Ryosho-san says proudly as he steps toward the sand.

Ah, I see now.

His words make it clear.

I’d actually been wondering for a while — why had Morisaki messaged, *“Wanna hit the beach in the evening?”*

I'd always pictured beaches as a daytime thing, so even though I agreed, it felt odd. But yeah… evening really is cooler, and there are fewer people.

A cool sea breeze brushes against me as I walk along the shore. The view spreading out before me lifts my mood naturally.

"Well then, you young ones go play by the sea.

Your kind, thoughtful older brothers will go prep the fireworks for you."

"If anything happens, just call."

Ryosho-san snaps a photo on his phone and heads toward the beach shack. Kotoha-san follows him.

Once they're out of sight, I turn my eyes toward the ocean. Beyond the horizon, the sun bends out of shape as it dyes everything red. The rippling surface glitters like it's scattered with diamonds.

I pull out my phone and switch to the camera.

Turning it sideways, I press the shutter.

While checking the photo, I hear Hotta's voice.

"I've always dreamed of eating this at the beach."

Hotta tears open a plastic bag — probably something he bought at the convenience store.

"Oh, that's the one Kana Hashigami does the commercial for."

"Totally unrelated to the beach though."

"Hold up, I'll film it for you."

Yeah, I've seen that commercial too —

Kana Hashigami eating a completely beach-unrelated chocolate cream sandwich with the sea in the background.

"Alright then, and… action—"

Hotta turns toward the sunset, holding the bread—

When suddenly, something black flashes across his hand.

"……Huh?"

All of us freeze in that instant.

There's nothing left in Hotta's hand.

We follow his gaze upward—

A bird, flapping its wings, flies away into the sky.

Once he grasps what happened, Hotta yells after it with all his might:

"Aaahh! My *'Summer Grand Thanksgiving: Double-Cream Chocolate Delight That's Rich to the Very Last Bite'*!"

His cry fades off into the sea breeze.

A brief silence—

Then we all look at each other—

and burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! You really said the full product name?!"

"Didn't even get a bite before it got stolen— that's tragic, man."

"Ha! I can't breathe, that was too funny."

I laugh too, tears forming at the corners of my eyes.

While catching my breath in the laughter's aftermath, my eyes meet Hotta's.

"Hah… well, it's a bummer I didn't get to eat it, but hey— if it made you laugh, it's all good."

"Eh?"

What…?

The sudden words leave me speechless.

"Oh, not like *that*," he adds quickly. "I just mean… I felt bad for earlier, you know?"

He lowers his eyebrows and gives me a sheepish smile. Ah, so that's it.

He's right — I hadn't laughed much today before now. I don't usually laugh that often, but still.

"It's fine, really. But… thanks."

I return his smile, grateful for the thought.

Then, suddenly, I'm yanked by the arm — again, for the second time today. The sand softens the pull, and before I know it, I'm drawn right into someone's chest.

"Alright, drama scene over~. Stop it, Hotta, before Hioki falls for you."

It's Watarai, still holding me close as he speaks.

Wait— what?

Sure, I was happy, but "fall for him"? That's another story. Besides, if we're talking about *drama moments*, Watarai's been the main actor all day. Like… right now, for example.

Just as I'm about to protest, Nakasato and Morisaki join in.

"What, Hioki's the heroine now?"

"Guess I'll try to win him over too."

"Please don't."

Watarai frowns at them, tightening his arm around me. Hey, don't go pushing the plot forward on your own.

I wiggle free from his grip.

"I'd rather not be anyone's heroine, thanks."

As I speak, I start slipping off my sandals.

The four of them watch with puzzled expressions.

Watarai tilts his head.

"What are you doing?"

"We came all the way here — might as well dip my feet in."

Leaving my sandals and bag somewhere dry, I walk toward the edge of the waves.

“Oh, I get it — the classic *‘Catch me if you can~’* thing.”

“It’s not that!”

I sigh as Nakasato pulls off his sneakers to join me.

Seriously, can they stop with the drama stuff already?

Reaching the spot where the waves barely touch, I roll up my pants.

A small wave slides over the top of my feet, tickling them. I take another step.

Now the water reaches my ankles.

I take a deep breath — the sea breeze fills my lungs.

Yeah… this temperature feels just right for summer.

As I play around, Nakasato comes up beside me.

“Hey, Hioki — you look like you’re in a karaoke MV.”

“…Was that supposed to be a compliment?”

Not pleased, I splash water at his shins.

“Oh, you did *not*! That was a compliment, you know~?”

He crouches down and throws water at me with his hands. The splash hits my shirt.

What the hell—

I only aimed at his legs!

I’m about to shove him into the sea when Ryosho-san’s voice rings out.

“Alright, kiddos, enough playing around. Come back!”

When I turn, he’s holding a bag of handheld fireworks. Kotoha-san’s beside him with a bucket.

“‘Kiddos,’ huh…”

“Unfair, right? We’re above average height!”

Nakasato trudges back toward the sand, water splashing around his legs. Yeah, I guess among this group, he and I look smaller.

Guess I’ll start drinking more milk tomorrow.

I follow after him toward the others.

“……Hm?”

Just as I step forward, something glints near my foot.

I crouch down and pick it up — a seashell, a pretty one at that. Holding it up toward the sunset, it sparkles.

Looking back down, I notice more shells scattered in the sand. My collecting instinct kicks in, and I start picking them up.

“Hioki, come on, fireworks time!”

“Mmm…”

A voice calls from above.

Watarai must’ve come to fetch me since I was taking too long. I give a half-hearted answer and glance up at him.

“Look, pretty, right?”

I smile, showing him the shells in my hand.

He freezes for a second, then smiles softly and brushes the hair from my face. I must look really childish right now.

Oh well — it’s Watarai.

I turn back to the sand and reach for another shell I spot.

“You’re still collecting? Come on, let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

I answer, but my hand doesn’t stop moving.

He sighs, and then — his arm suddenly slips around my waist. Before I can react, my feet leave the ground.

“Whoa, what the—?!”

“You wouldn’t listen, so I’m carrying you.”

“…Sorry.”

He keeps holding me as we head back toward the others. Haven’t been carried like this since forever… not that it matters.

“Not heavy?”

“…Not heavy.”

Yeah, right.

He’s taller, sure, but our weights can’t be *that* different. If anything, I probably eat more — judging from the school trip. I sigh internally.

Wrong question — I should be asking him to *put me down*.

“Uh, could you… maybe let me down now?”

“You wanna walk across the sand with wet feet?”

“…”

“Didn’t think so.”

He chuckles softly by my ear.

He’s right — I hate the thought of sand sticking to my wet feet.

In the end, he carries me all the way to the foot-washing area. On the way, Morisaki and Hotta throw out comments like “Big baby!” and “Punishment game?” but I ignore them.

Once he sets me down, Watarai rubs his arms.

Yeah… carrying someone your own weight can’t feel great.

“Thanks for carrying me… you okay?”

“Might be sore tomorrow.”

“…Sorry. I’ll lose weight.”

I say it apologetically, and he smiles slightly.

“What, want me to carry you again?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Relax, I’m joking. I’ll grab your shoes and towel — go ahead and wash up.”

“Oh, right, my stuff…”

I mutter, suddenly remembering.

He stops and turns with a smug grin.

“Already moved it to a safe spot while you and Nakasato were playing. You’re welcome.”

What a capable guy.

“As expected. Guess I really *could* fall for you.”

The words slip out before I can stop them.

Watarai laughs. “Go ahead.”

Then he heads off to fetch the bag.

Yeah… no beating the king of drama moments.

I turn the tap and let the water run, washing from my ankles upward. Balancing on one foot is tricky, but I manage.

Just as I finish, Watarai returns.

“Here, towel.”

“Thanks.”

I take it and wipe my hands.

He sets my sandals down neatly in front of me.

When I try to wipe while standing on one foot, I nearly wobble, so I call out to him.

“Mind if I lean on you for a sec?”

“Go ahead.”

I rest a hand on his shoulder, wipe my feet, and slip on the sandals.

Looking at the hand that held his shoulder, then up at him, I find myself wondering —

How far would Watarai go to grant my requests?

He's never really refused me, and right now, he didn't even hesitate.

I lower my hand, say, "Thanks," and smile.

He smiles back, "Anytime," and starts walking.

I fall into step beside him, quietly testing the thought that had just crossed my mind.

"Hey, if I said I wanted you to carry me right now, would you do it? …I haven't lost any weight though."

"Why? Are your feet hurting?"

"No, not that. Just, you know—hypothetically."

"I don't really get it, but… if you want me to, sure."

As we walked along the beach, Watarai answered with a puzzled look. So apparently, he'd actually say yes.

Guess I'll have to think of something harder to make him say no next time.

"Then what if I asked you to lend me some money?"

"…Are you plotting something? What's up with you?"

"Ah, no worries. I haven't lost it or anything."

"…Hmm, depends on the amount."

After looking a little concerned, Watarai thought for a second and replied:

"Well, that's only if it's you, Hiyoki."

He added that with a small smile.

I couldn't help but let out a wry laugh.

“That’s… gonna make me useless, you know.”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Why? No way.”

When Watarai smiled at me, I quickly shook my head. If I let this overly caring guy spoil me, I’d probably stop functioning as a proper human being.

We walked along the dimly lit beach until we caught up with Nakazato and the others.

“Man, Hiyoki, you’re lucky—you’ve got a diehard fan.”

“A diehard what?”

Nakazato called out as he opened a bag of fireworks.

The unfamiliar term made me tilt my head, and Hotta explained:

“It means he only has eyes for you.”

“Plus, he doesn’t allow anyone else to share that obsession.”

When Morisaki glanced at Watarai, he sighed.

Watarai just said, “You really get it,” and pulled out a firework from the bag Nakazato was holding.

He handed me one.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

I accepted it.

I still didn’t really get that “diehard fan” or “no-sharing” thing, but I guess it’s kinda like being a personal butler or something.

Actually, that suits him weirdly well.

As I was thinking that, Ryosho-san twirled a lighter in his hand, grinning like a kid who’d just found a new toy. He slung an arm around Watarai’s shoulder.

“If you’ve got any trouble, your big brother here’ll always listen,

yeah?”

“Don’t need it.”

“I can even hook you up with some, uh, useful contacts.”

“Need it even less.”

“Aw, no fun!”

I glanced at the two talking in low voices, then back at the firework in my hand. I really just wanted to light it already.

But Ryosho-san had the lighter.

So I called over to Morisaki.

“Hey, can I borrow the lighter?”

“Ah, wait a sec.”

Instead of going to Ryosho-san, Morisaki walked over to Kokon-san. … Why?

While I stood frozen, Morisaki waved me over.

“Kokon-san’s got it.”

…Okay, but what am I supposed to do with that?

Go over there?

While I hesitated, Nakazato and Hotta pushed me from behind.

“Don’t be scared!”

“C’mon, gotta start some friendly convo first!”

Why am I suddenly the one who’s supposed to get close to him? I stumbled my way in front of Kokon-san.

We’d met in that convenience store parking lot, so as long as I didn’t freak out, I should be fine.

“You want the lighter?”

“…Y-yeah.”

Nope. Not fine.

“Do you want the lighter?” sounded way too much like “Do you want to live?” Maybe it was just the lighting, but he was definitely scarier at night.

While I was trembling, Kokon-san reached out a hand.

“Don’t be so frightened. I’m sorry about before at the station… I mean no harm.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry for freaking out…”

I took the lighter and bowed my head.

“Hey, why not take it a step further and call him ‘Kokon-chan’?”

“Or give him a nickname! Like ‘Shi-chan’?”

What the hell are these idiots saying?

Do they even realize how insane that sounds?

That’s not one step, that’s a full lap around the planet. I shook my head violently.

Then Kokon-san, who’d been watching us, spoke:

“Then, may I call you Asahi?”

“Yes—of course! Absolutely! I’d be honored. And I’ll call you, um, Kokon-sa—”

I stopped mid-sentence.

Wait, I’ve been calling him Kokon-san this whole time. Everyone else does too, and I just went along with it.

That’s… actually kinda rude.

“I’ll call you Tachibana-san then…”

“No, first name’s fine. Everyone calls me that.”

“…Got it.”

He probably smiled to put me at ease.

Honestly, it was still terrifying, but I appreciated the effort, so I forced myself to smile back.

“Alright, let’s do the fireworks.”

“Yeah, now that Asahi and Kokon-san are all buddy-buddy.”

Morisaki and Nakazato said that—though “buddy-buddy” is a stretch.

“Watarai’s still… getting harassed, huh.”

When Hotta said that, I looked back and saw Watarai still being mercilessly pestered by Ryosho-san.

I’d never seen him look that fed up before.

Now I was kinda curious what that was even about.

Anyway, I ignored them and joined the group near the bucket of water. We started lighting the handheld fireworks one by one.

The sparks were so bright they etched themselves into my eyes, flowing downward like a golden waterfall.

As I crouched watching, I heard Nakazato’s voice.

He tossed his spent firework into the bucket.

“Hey! I’m gonna write something with fire—guess what it says!”

He stepped back and started moving the burning stick around. I squinted to follow the trail.

…Wow, that’s long.

I lost track after the first stroke—it was way too many letters. I gave up and glanced at Hotta and Morisaki. Both were recording with their phones. Seriously? You’re not even watching.

“So? Did you figure it out?”

Nakazato came back looking super proud.

I shook my head, feeling a little bad.

He looked over to the other two—they both shook their heads too. Figures, they weren’t even looking.

Nakazato sighed. “Aww, really?”

Then, from above us, Kokon-san’s voice said:

“‘Summer Grand Appreciation Festival: Double Cream Sandwich Bread with Rich Chocolate Layers.’”

All of us looked up at him.

“Correct! Wow, Kokon-san, you’re amazing!”

“““Whoa…”””

Nakazato high-fived him with a quiet *slap*, grinning wide. How the hell did he even figure that out? And that was so many characters!

While I was watching them, something suddenly pressed hard against my back.

Ah, so he finally escaped.

“You done?”

“…Yeah.”

Watarai rested his forehead against my shoulder, rubbing it tiredly. He looked completely worn out.

“Oooh, look at you two putting on a show,” Ryosho-san said, laughing as he strolled over. Even at night, his smile was blinding.

Yup, total menace.

“I don’t really get what’s going on, but maybe tone it down a little?”

“What, even though this involves your precious Asahi’s chastity?”

“Eh—wait, seriously?”

“Dead serious. Big time. Maybe his purity’s in danger—”

“…Ryosho-san, I *will* report you.”

Watarai growled behind me in a low tone.

Pretty sure there were some words I wish I hadn’t heard in there. Ryosho-san just smirked and kept talking.

“Oh? So Asahi’s the innocent type, huh?”

“Ryosho, that’s enough.”

Kokon-san placed a hand on his shoulder, and Ryosho lifted both hands like “I surrender,” grinning all the while.

“My bad, my bad. Anyway, I’m starving—finish up so we can eat.”

After calling out, “Nao,” to Morisaki, he tossed him the lighter and walked off with Kokon-san.

No way he actually felt bad.

With Watarai still clinging to me, I turned to Morisaki. I just said what I was thinking.

“Morisaki, you’re kinda cute, you know.”

“Huh?”

“After seeing *that*, maybe he kinda is.”

“He’s got the same bad mouth, though.”

Hotta chuckled, lighting another firework.

Nakazato took one out too, smiling awkwardly.

“Watarai, you agree, right?”

“…Hiyoki’s cuter.”

“Ah yeah, here we go—consistent as ever, our diehard fan.”

Morisaki sighed, flicking the lighter to spark another firework. When I silently held mine out, he met my eyes briefly before lighting it for me.

This one burned a different color, illuminating the beach again.

“Pass me the fire.”

Watarai stood beside me and touched his sparkler to mine. The flame caught, and his firework hissed softly, spilling golden sparks toward the sand.

“Ah, only sparklers left now.”

Hotta pulled out five senko hanabi sparklers and handed one to each of us. They go fast with five people.

A little disappointed, I took mine and clicked the lighter.

We all watched the tiny, flickering sparks together.

“Why do sparklers always come last, anyway?”

“Doesn’t really feel like a strong ending.”

“It’s for the ‘aesthetic,’ I guess.”

“So fancy～.”

One by one, the glowing beads of fire dropped into the sand, disappearing.

It was over.

I tossed the burned-out remains into the bucket.

Then suddenly—*clap!*—a sharp sound echoed behind me. Startled, I instinctively grabbed Watarai’s arm.

"All right! We're done! Let’s eat, let’s eat!"

When I turned around, Ryoushou-san was smiling and pointing toward the beach shack. I wish he’d call out to me more normally.

I pressed my hand against my chest, where my heart was still thumping loudly.

"What should we do with the buckets and trash?"

"I’ll take care of those."

When Hotta raised his voice while holding a bucket, Kokoro-san began cleaning up the remnants of the fireworks.

I tried to help, but Kokoro-san stopped me, saying, “Go on ahead,” so I thanked him and started walking toward the beach shack.

"Still scared?"

"Huh? Of what?"

Watarai spoke to me, but I didn't understand what he meant and tilted my head. He lowered his face slightly.

"You're still holding onto my arm."

"Oh! …Sorry!"

I quickly pulled my hand away from his arm.

I completely forgot I was holding onto him—how embarrassing.

"I just feel calm when I do."

"Hmm… am I the only one?"

"Huh?"

"That feeling of calm—am I the only one?"

"Ah, yeah… guess so, just you, Watarai."

I thought for a second before answering.

Well, I haven't really been in contact with anyone else, so I don't know. When I answered honestly, Watarai stared at me for a moment, then smiled faintly.

It felt a little strange.

I can't explain it well, but his smile seemed different—not his usual

refreshing grin. Maybe it just looked that way because of the darkness. Whatever, I thought, climbing the wooden stairs to where Ryoushou-san was sitting. On the table, scallops and oysters were sizzling on the grill, steaming deliciously. They looked so good that my heart fluttered.

"Drinks are over there at the bar—help yourself,"

Ryoushou-san said, gesturing with his chin while holding tongs. My stomach was growling, so I decided to get a drink later and took a seat.

"Hiyoki, what do you want to drink? I'll bring it."

"Then, just water."

Watarai stood up and offered, so I took him up on it.

He said "Okay," and headed to the counter, with Hotta following him, saying, "I'll come too."

"Haha! Thoughtful, huh~ So, do you like him?"

"Huh? Uh, yes."

"I see, I see~"

I didn't understand how "thoughtful" connected to "like," but I nodded anyway. Ryoushou-san cheerfully smiled and placed the grilled shellfish on plates.

"Hey, don't tease him too much, bro."

"What, no way!"

"I’m never asking Ryoushou-san for relationship advice."

Morisaki and Nakazato sighed.

Ryoushou-san laughed as he put shrimp and clams on the grill.

"I’ll get the info from Nao, don’t worry."

"…Don’t you dare."

"Can’t make any promises."

"You didn’t tell him about the school trip, right?"

"Oh, the one where his childhood friend got stolen?"

"…Sorry."

"Ughhh, seriously the worst."

Nakazato groaned, holding his head, just as Watarai and Hotta came back, each carrying glasses.

"Thanks."

"You’re welcome."

Watarai placed a glass of water next to me and sat down beside me. Everyone was seated, but since Kokoro-san hadn’t returned yet, I didn’t pick up my chopsticks. Then Ryoushou-san spoke.

"You can start eating; Kokoro will be back soon anyway."

I wondered if I should’ve helped after all, but clasped my hands and scooped out some scallop meat.

"So, the only one without dating experience is Asahi, huh? You got a type?"

"Now that you mention it, we didn't get to ask Hiyoki that night on the trip."

Apparently, Ryoushou-san was determined to start a love talk. Hotta chimed in, remembering as well.

I really did fall asleep before answering that night.

Everyone's eyes were on me—so awkward.

A type, huh…

"Well, I…"

"Wait, don't say it yet! For example, if Asahi were a girl, who in this group would you date?"

"…What?"

I was baffled by Ryoushou-san's question.

Why that?

Isn't "type" supposed to mean what kind of girl I like? Why am I being imagined as a girl?

Before I could argue, Ryoushou-san hurried me.

It'd be annoying to argue, so fine, whatever.

I glanced at the four faces.

Sorry, but Ryoushou-san is out of the question.

"Hmm… if I had to date someone…"

"Think seriously—it's a relationship, so imagine living together, maybe even marriage."

What the heck.

He interrupted, making me hesitate.

I just wanted to give a random answer, but apparently, that wasn't allowed.

Living together? Marriage? Never thought about that. Would we get along? Would he be kind to kids?

I felt dumb for even thinking about it seriously.

Anyway, someone who'd treat me kindly would be nice, I thought, glancing beside me.

"Probably Watarai."

"Ohhh~! And why's that?"

"He seems loyal… like, the really intense type."

"Ah, right! The clingy, obsessive kind of loyal, huh? Congrats!"

Ryoushou-san grinned at Watarai.

Whatever, at least that's over.

"So Hiyoki likes loyal types?"

"That's if I were a girl… but yeah, maybe."

Nakazato asked, and I answered.

Wouldn’t want to be cheated on like his ex did.

I popped a scallop into my mouth—it tasted amazing.

Then the talk shifted to Morisaki’s breakup strategy with his ex. As I listened, I imagined the scene.

Yeah, if Ryoushou-san and Kokoro-san suddenly showed up, you’d have no choice but to nod along.

As I ate, a loud, cheerful voice called from behind.

"Yo~ you boys college students?"

"Let us buy you drinks, come on!"

Turning around, I saw a man wobbling with glasses and bottles in hand—clearly drunk. He was from the group sitting behind us. Others got up too, shouting things like “Try this one!” and “Where are the pretty girls?”

"Ah, these guys are minors, so no thanks. We appreciate the offer though."

"Huh~? Minors~? But you’re of age, ain’t ya?"

"I’m driving after this."

"Ah, come on, just take a cab!"

"Ugh, shut up already, go home, old man."

"What’d you say, punk?!"

"Seriously, go home—ah! Kokoro, over here!"

"Kokoro~? A cute girl, maybe?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The drunk man pestering Ryoushou-san froze instantly when he turned around. Well, yeah, figures.

"Do you need something?"

"Uh… suddenly feeling sleepy…"

"Yeah yeah, go drink some water and cool off."

Clearly intimidated, the man hurried back to his seat.

Ryoushou-san waved him off like shooing a fly.

Thank you, Kokoro-san.

"What took you so long?"

"Had a smoke."

"Cool."

Hotta spoke up when Kokoro-san sat down.

A smoker, huh—kind of suits him.

"Man, that helped."

"Drunks are a hassle."

"Totally."

Ryoushou-san handed him a drink and added more seafood to the plate.

Feeling thirsty, I grabbed the nearest glass and took a big gulp—

Instantly, my throat burned.

It was scalding.

Not just my throat—heat flooded my whole body.

I reflexively spat out what was left in my mouth.

"Ugh…! *cough cough*!"

I doubled over, coughing violently.

Glasses and plates clattered on the table—maybe I'd hit them. All I could do was gag and cough uncontrollably, overwhelmed by the pain.

Everyone around me panicked.

"Hiyoki! You okay?!"

"Should we call an ambulance?!"

"What's the address here?!"

"Maybe have the staff call?!"

I heard their frantic voices and felt someone rubbing my back. Other customers were murmuring too.

"Doesn’t seem like he just choked."

"Yeah… that was alcohol. Probably what those drunks left behind—strong stuff, too."

"Unbelievable. Out of everyone, they gave it to the purest one."

Someone took the glass from my hand.

Ryoushou-san and Kokoro-san’s calm voices floated above me. Then a staff member rushed over.

"Excuse me! Is that boy all right?!"

"Ah, sorry, yeah—just accidentally drank the wrong thing."

"Sorry for the commotion."

Ryoushou-san handled it smoothly, then spoke to me.

"Asahi, you okay? Can you drink water?"

Desperate to cool my throat, I nodded.

He placed a glass in my trembling hands.

"It’s water, don’t worry."

He patted my head gently.

I sipped the water—my throat still stung, but it helped.

I breathed shallowly, trying to calm down.

Wait… I must look awful right now—tears, snot, maybe alcohol all over me. I wanted to disappear.

I was about to cry again from embarrassment when Watarai, still rubbing my back, spoke softly.

"You okay, Hiyoki?"

"…Ti…ssu…"

I croaked the word. Couldn't speak any louder.

Watarai caught on and called for tissues.

When I got them, I blew my nose and wiped my face. Still breathing heavily, I tried to cool myself down when Kokoro-san said—

"Asahi, I'll clean the floor. Go rest over there."

"Ah… no, I'll… clean… the floor…"

My words were a mess.

When I tried standing, my vision swayed and I nearly fell, but Watarai caught my arm.

"We'll handle it—go sit down, both of you."

"Both?"

I tilted my head, and Ryoushou-san smiled slyly.

"It’s safer if he’s not alone—stay with him."

Watarai took my hand and gently led me to a bench nearby.

"You okay?"

"…I think so."

"If it gets bad, tell me, okay?"

"Thanks."

He peered at me, and I averted my eyes slightly.

□□□

I don’t know how long we sat there.

The heat in my body wouldn’t fade; my mind was hazy.

So this is what alcohol feels like…

Not sure if I’m weak or strong to it.

Oh no—I’m underage. I drank alcohol.

Will I get in trouble? I hope not.

My vision blurred again.

I felt like crying—maybe I’ve cried enough for a whole year tonight.

"Hiyoki, let’s go wash your face once you’ve calmed down."

Watarai’s voice brought me back.

I turned toward him; his face looked worried.

"…"

For some reason, I wanted him to hold me.

Because I was scared.

Or maybe… I just wanted warmth.

I feel safe with Watarai.

But I’m all messy—would that gross him out?

I don’t know.

Still, I want him to hug me.

Would he, if I asked?

Thinking vaguely, I leaned against him, resting my forehead on his chest. He froze for a moment, then started gently patting my back and head like always.

I like this.

The feeling of Watarai’s touch.

Maybe it’s the alcohol, but my head felt fuzzier.

I exhaled softly.

"Aww, you’re the clingy type when drunk? Cute～"

Ryoushou-san’s voice came, and he patted my head.

I shook him off and pressed my face deeper into Watarai’s chest.

"Oh-ho, someone’s got a crush?"

"Could you please be quiet?"

Watarai stopped talking, pulled me closer, and held me tight.

I felt completely at ease.

I tightened my arms around his back.

"What are we even watching?"

"Alcohol’s scary, huh."

"So Hiyoki’s a cuddly drunk～"

I heard the others chatting faintly.

Then someone tapped my back.

I turned slightly.

"Want to use my chest too?"

Nakazato spread his arms.

I already felt comfortable enough, but maybe someone else's chest could feel even better? As I considered, Watarai pulled me back firmly.

"Hiyoki's coming with me to the sink."

He asked softly, "Can you stand?"

I nodded and slowly stood up.

He took my hand again and led me away.

The sink was outside, under the night sky.

The cool wind felt refreshing.

"Hiyoki, you really are drunk, right?"

"Mm… a little?"

"A little?"

"I dunno, it's my first time drinking."

He was walking ahead, still holding my hand.

I felt floaty, but more stable now.

"Am I acting weird?"

"No, just cute."

"Okay."

He smiled right away.

Not weird, then—good.

"Yeah, you're definitely drunk. Usually you'd get embarrassed or deny it if I called you cute."

"Maybe so."

I chuckled at myself for speaking without thinking.

At the sink, I rinsed my mouth and splashed my face.

The water felt great—probably because I was overheated.

While staring blankly at the drain, I heard Watarai again. "Done?"

I nodded, dripping wet. He handed me a towel—his, probably.

"Can I use this?"

"Sure. It's fine."

"Thanks."

I pressed the towel to my face—it smelled like him.

I paused for a moment, and he spoke again, worried.

"You okay? You feel sick?"

"Ah, sorry. Your scent’s calming."

"…You keep saying things like that."

He sighed and rubbed his temple.

"Don’t even know what that does to me," he muttered softly.

Did I upset him?

I apologized, and he smiled faintly. "Let’s go back."

"I’ll wash and return this."

"You don’t have to… but okay, sure."

"Yeah."

I squeezed the towel and spoke again.

"You’re kind, Watarai."

"How so?"

"Um, you didn’t freak out when I threw up."

"Anyone would do that."

"Ah… then lending your shoulder, or hugging me?"

"That’s just for you."

There it was again—“only you.”

"If you keep that up, I’ll get too dependent."

"I’m making you that way on purpose."

He answered instantly, almost interrupting me.

Is he really trying to make me helpless?

I didn’t get it, but I asked anyway.

"What if I really do become useless?"

"I’ll take care of you forever."

"You mean… like, take me in?"

"…Yeah, something like that."

That made no sense.

He’d gain nothing from that.

Then it hit me—

"Wait… are you… confessing to me right now?"

"……."

He didn’t answer right away, stopping in his tracks.

I turned to him—couldn’t see clearly, but I could tell.

I was right.

Watarai liked me.

Not as a friend—but romantically.

The sound of waves filled the silence.

Then he spoke quietly.

"This isn’t how I planned it."

"Huh?"

"You figured it out, huh?"

"Uh… so, you mean… you like me… right?"

"Yeah. Romantically."

He smiled faintly, with a trace of resignation.

The sea breeze blew between us, as if carrying our old friendship away.

"…Sorry for making things awkward."

He chuckled sadly and started walking again.

But I couldn’t move.

No, I had to say something.

"Wait."

I tried to run after him—but right, I'd been drinking.

My vision wobbled, my feet sank in the sand—I stumbled. So lame.

But before I fell, Watarai caught me.

Smooth. Too smooth.

My mind gave up thinking. Words came straight from my heart.

"Um… I've never liked anyone before."

"Never confessed or been confessed to."

"I don't really get romance."

"But everyone loves differently, so…"

"I don't think it's weird that you like me."

"I mean… I'll support you—wait, that sounds wrong…"

He held me quietly, waiting.

I was rambling, losing confidence.

"But I don't know… I don't hate it. I like being with you—it feels nice and safe. I just don't know if that's romantic."

My eyes blurred again.

Still, I spoke.

"I can't answer right away… but I'll try to figure it out. Until then,

let’s stay the same, okay?"

"…Got it."

The unfamiliar emotions scared me.

Tears slipped out again.

"Thanks."

He wiped my tears and smiled.

"Do you think my feelings are gross?"

He stared at me. I shook my head firmly.

"Can I… keep liking you?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

His smile changed—warmer, but also something deeper.

"Then—"

"—I don’t have to hold back anymore, right?"

……What?

He smiled sweetly and hugged me tighter.

My brain short-circuited.

Hold back… what?!

"Wait—you were holding back?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"Hold back from what?"

When I asked, Watarai loosened his arms slightly and looked at me again.

“Did you understand that I like you, Hioki?”

“Yeah.”

“Earlier you said you’re not sure if you like me in a romantic way, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then that means there’s still a chance you might like me that way, right?”

“…I guess so.”

“Then all I have to do now is show you just how much I like you.”

“…”

Pressed by Watarai’s confidence, I flinched a little. Where did all that certainty come from? Would he still like me after seeing the parts of me I don’t like?

“For example, is there a chance you’d stop liking me?”

“None.”

He cut my words down without hesitation. His resolve was unbelievable.

“I’ll tell you how I feel again when you’re sober.”

“…Yeah, but—”

“You don’t have to answer right away. Even if you turn me down at graduation, that’s fine.”

“…”

One and a half years until graduation. It sounds long, but high school goes by fast. Before then, I’ll have to find my own answer and tell him.

“…I’ll try my best.”

“That’s my line.”

Watarai smiled and patted my head. His hand trailed down from my head, tracing my outline until he held my hand tightly. With a gentle smile, he started walking, and I followed.

As we retraced our steps, Watarai suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, Hioki, you work out for club practice, right?”

“? Yeah, it’s part of the routine.”

“…Maybe I should start too.”

“Why?”

“So if you ever ask me to carry you, I can easily lift you up.”

“Ah… that was a joke though.”

I looked up at his face and laughed. Watarai glanced at me, then looked forward again and began muttering about workout plans.

“Working out, like push-ups?”

“Sit-ups too. I’ve even started to get a bit of abs now… look.”

“…Huh?”

He lifted his shirt and pressed our joined hands to his stomach. Though, since we’d just eaten, it was hard to tell. When I asked, “How is it?”, Watarai stopped and frowned.

“Did you already forget?”

“Forget what?”

“You understood that I like you, right?”

“…Y-yeah.”

“Then do you want me to show you what happens when you act carelessly toward someone who likes you?”

He said that and slowly traced his hand along my stomach, sliding it upward. My skin twitched at the ticklish sensation. His hand stopped at my chest before pulling away.

“…You’re not gonna resist?”

“Ah… sorry.”

I apologized reflexively, and he sighed deeply, holding his head in frustration before speaking again.

“For now, when you turn twenty, you’re not allowed to drink with anyone but me.”

“…Why? Even people you know?”

“No. Absolutely not. I refuse. If you ever do drink with someone, you have to tell me first.”

“…If I remember, I’ll let you know.”

“That totally means you won’t.”

“…Guess I can’t tie you down unless you’re my boyfriend.”

He muttered in a low voice and sighed again. I felt like he just said something really intense. Honestly, that was kind of scary—let’s just go back already.

“Anyway, let’s head back.”

“…Yeah.”

Though clearly displeased, Watarai took my hand gently and matched my pace, probably mindful that I was still tipsy.

The stairs creaked as we climbed back up to where everyone was. The table now held only drinks—it seemed time to go.

“Oh! You’re finally back—wait, what happened?”

Seeing us, Ryōto tilted his head suspiciously. The man's intuition was sharp as ever.

"There was something, but our relationship's the same."

Watarai brushed past him, answering plainly. He said it so easily—was that okay? Ryōto grinned slyly and leaned toward me.

"If you ever need advice, I'm always here."

"There's a zero percent chance of that, but thanks."

Watarai answered with a smile before I could. He was right, so I nodded too. Not that I even had Ryōto's contact info.

"Boring," Ryōto muttered, looking away.

Oh, right. I bowed to him.

"Thank you for cleaning the floor earlier."

"No problem. It's way better than puke, so don't worry about it."

"…It was basically the same though."

"Eh, close enough."

He laughed it off.

"Sorry to cut this short, but we should go. It'll be past midnight by the time everyone gets home," Kokoro said, checking his watch.

I looked at my phone—almost 9 p.m. It'd take a bit over two hours to get home, so yeah, time to wrap up.

“We didn’t get to talk much.”

“Because of that drunk old guy.”

“Hey, at least he paid as an apology.”

“Wait, he did?”

Surprised, I turned toward the now-empty table.

“Yeah, he left money saying sorry,” Nakazato said with a laugh. “Well, it wasn’t enough though,” Horita added as they walked toward the van.

I followed them down the beach, thinking about how chaotic—but fun—the day had been. Remembering Horita’s stolen bread incident made me smile.

“Still drunk?”

“Who knows? I’m not totally sober yet, but I’m conscious.”

Watarai peeked at my face, and I laughed. He smiled too and ruffled my hair.

“Drunk Hioki was cute though.”

“…Thanks, I guess.”

Even though I’d gotten used to being called cute by him, after what happened earlier, it hit differently this time.

We got into the car—same seats as before. Ryōto spoke from the driver's seat. "Whose house is closest from here?"

"Me!"

"You're last."

He dismissed Morisaki immediately and waited for the others to answer. Horita asked where everyone lived, and we each gave our city names.

"Closest is Haruki, then Tsumutaka, then Hayato, and finally Asahi."

"Huh? My place is closer than Hioki's though."

"Yeah, guess we owe him an apology," Ryōto muttered while setting the GPS.

Apology for what? Being a jerk, maybe?

As I wondered, Kokoro turned back to explain for him.

"It was wrong of us to let you drink, even if by mistake."

"Ah… um, thank you?"

I was surprised by his sincerity. He really didn't need to apologize. Still, that was unexpectedly mature of him.

The car started moving through quiet roads lit by scattered lights.

"Let's have some music," Ryōto said, pressing buttons until a classy, relaxing tune played. Huh, that's unexpected—I thought it'd be rock.

“This music’s making me sleepy,” Nakazato said, echoing my thoughts.

The car’s rhythm, the dim lights, and the soft melody all blended together, lulling me into drowsiness. I sank deeper into my seat and rested my head.

From far away, I heard Ryōto’s voice.

“Go ahead and sleep. I haven’t driven in six months, so if you’re all awake, I’ll get nervous.”

Wait, what?!

I opened my eyes wide. That’s what’s concerning! What if we crash while I’m asleep?!

Sensing my unease, Kokoro reassured me.

“It’s been three months, not six.”

That… doesn’t sound much better.

While anxiety wrestled with sleepiness, Watarai tugged me gently.

“It’s fine. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

He patted my thigh softly, as if soothing me. When I looked at him, he smiled kindly, so I let myself relax and drifted off.

Whether from exhaustion or alcohol, I fell asleep quickly.

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I woke to the feeling of someone moving me. My eyelids lifted on their own.

“Eh? You’re awake?”

Watarai looked surprised. He was holding my bag—guess we’d reached his house. Which meant I’d missed saying bye to Nakazato.

“…I don’t know, I just woke up.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Bye.”

“Yeah, see you.”

He got out, thanked Ryōto and the others, and shut the door. I stretched in the cramped seat, then pulled out my phone to message Nakazato.

When the car started moving again, Horita turned to me. “Are your parents scary?”

“Huh? Why?”

“The brothers were worried you’d get in trouble—like, what if you got hit?”

Morisaki joined in. They probably meant the drinking. I think my parents will understand once I explain.

“I don’t think they’ll be mad. They’re probably asleep already anyway.”

It was almost 11 p.m.—my dad would definitely be asleep.

“Well, we’re ready to grovel if needed,” Ryōto said from the front. “I can take fifty punches easy,” Kokoro added.

What kind of conversation is that?!

I shook my head quickly. “It’s fine, really.” Ryōto just chuckled and started driving.

After about thirty minutes, we dropped Horita off.

“See ya!”

“Later.”

“Bye.”

We waved him off. As he left, Morisaki called out,

“We’ll be there soon. Come sit up front.”

“Okay.”

I moved up one row and buckled my seatbelt.

“Hioki, give me your hand.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Just do it.”

He took my hand and intertwined our fingers. What’s he doing? I gave him a puzzled look.

“How’s that?”

“How’s what?”

“Feel anything?”

“No, nothing.”

He let go and unbuckled my seatbelt. Then he suddenly pulled me close.

“Then how about this?”

“What do you mean by—”

He hugged me tightly. My body stiffened. What the hell? Before I could react, Ryōto spoke.

“Which one’s better?”

“What?”

“Between Tsumutaka and me—which one makes you feel more comfortable?”

Morisaki whispered in my ear, rubbing my back.

Feel comfortable? How am I supposed to answer that? I pushed him away gently.

“I don’t know, but… if I had to say, Watarai.”

“Why?”

“Why? Hmm… maybe because I’m used to being hugged by him?”

“Hah! That sounds misleading!”

Ryōto burst out laughing, and yeah, I realized how weird that sounded.

“That’s not what I meant…”

“Well, maybe that’ll change someday. Depends on what Tsumutaka wants.”

Wow, he really loves teasing people. I sighed, and he smiled at me through the rearview mirror.

“Why do you keep asking about me and Watarai anyway?”

I finally voiced what had been bugging me. From what I’d seen, Ryōto seemed particularly interested in Watarai. Did he know? That Watarai liked me?

“At first it was just a hunch,” Ryōto said as he turned the wheel, “but I kinda get it.”

Then he added casually:

“I’ve dated a guy before too.”

…What?

I was speechless. Really?

I looked at Morisaki beside me—he nodded.

So it’s true.

“Huh, you’re not weirded out?”

“…Love is different for everyone.”

“Naomi was totally freaked out, but Asahi, you’re so kind~.”

I repeated the same words I’d said to Watarai to Ryōto-san, and he made a mock-crying gesture with one hand.

It had only been three months since he last drove, so I really wished he’d keep both hands on the wheel.

Wait—if Morisaki *did* react badly, does that mean if he knows there’s a chance Watarai and I might end up together, he’s disgusted by it?

Nervously, I turned my face toward him again. Morisaki’s expression was calm and composed as he spoke flatly:

“As long as it doesn’t cause me trouble, I don’t care.”

“Oh, uh… okay.”

“Actually, I kinda noticed since the school trip. Horita and Nakazato probably did too.”

“Eh…?”

So everyone already knew and still acted normal around us? Or did Watarai talk to them about it?

While I was silently spiraling in my head, Morisaki’s voice cut in again.

“Anyway, it’s not like we’re gonna get distant or anything. Things’ll be the same, so don’t worry.”

“Ah… thanks.”

Their casual kindness made me embarrassed instead.

Now that *I* knew they knew, it just felt awkward. Feeling my face heat up, I realized the car had stopped.

What a timing to arrive…

I fanned my face quickly, trying to cool down.

“Well, let us know if you two end up dating.”

Saying that, Ryōto-san unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the car door. Kokoro-san got out too.

Wait, that means *he* heard everything as well, doesn’t it? I wanted to die. Still, I got out of the car.

“Ah, wait.”

Just as I started walking toward my house, Ryōto-san came up beside me, pulling out his phone.

“Tsugutaka turned me down, but since we’re in similar positions, let’s exchange contacts.”

“Similar positions?”

“Top or bottom.”

“…Huh.”

I had no idea what he meant, but I took out my phone anyway, scanned his QR code, added him, and slipped it back into my pocket.

We started walking, and the others followed.

“Um, this is fine, you don’t have to come further.”

“I told you—we’re coming to get scolded too.”

Morisaki said, walking beside me.

Oh, right… he *did* say that earlier.

We reached the front gate, and I pressed the intercom. My sister's voice came through.

"Welcome ba—… wait, are you asking for money?"

"No! It's my friends, plus one of their brothers, and his friend."

If she was watching through the monitor, it probably looked like a debt collection gang at the door.

I quickly explained before she misunderstood.

After a short pause, she replied, "I'll come," and hung up.

"Not your parents?"

"They're probably asleep by now."

I answered Kokoro-san, and a moment later the door opened. My sister came out, clearly unprepared for visitors—hoodie, mask, the whole thing. She came to the gate and unlocked it.

"Nice to meet you, thank you very much for bringing my brother home."

Nervous, she bowed deeply—like, a full 100 degrees.

"We should be the ones apologizing for dropping him off so late."

"And we also let him drink by accident… please accept this as an apology."

Both Kokoro-san and Ryōto-san bowed and handed her a paper bag. Even Morisaki bowed slightly.

"Thank you, that's very thoughtful. Sorry—he's at the age where he puts anything in his mouth."

"…No, no, not at all."

What am I, a toddler?

I nudged my sister, silently telling her to stop the jokes.

"Well then, we'll be going. Please take care of him."

"I'm sorry we couldn't offer anything in return."

Ryōto-san, struggling not to laugh, bowed again, and my sister did too. I also gave a small bow.

“See ya.”

“Yeah, bye-bye.”

I waved at Morisaki as the three of them walked away. Once the car’s sound faded, my sister exhaled beside me.

“Ugh, that was nerve-wracking! Did I do okay?!”

“You failed from start to finish.”

“Seriously thought today was my death day.”

“Same here.”

We locked the door and headed to the living room.

“Whoa, this looks expensive.”

“Now that you mention it, what do they even do for work? How old are they?”

Looking into the paper bag, I saw a box from a famous French confectionery. When did they even buy this?

I put it down, washed my hands, and checked the clock—it was 11:30 p.m. It felt too late for a full bath, but I couldn’t sleep without rinsing off. After a bit of internal debate, I decided on a quick shower.

Grabbing my pajamas from my room, I hurried to finish before midnight.

About fifteen minutes later, I returned to the living room to find my sister on a call— probably with her boyfriend.

It was such a normal sight that I quietly slipped into my room and sat on the sofa.

As I spaced out, our cat climbed onto my lap, purring when I stroked its neck.

“Mm, okay, talk to you later~.”

My sister hung up and sat next to me.

“So, tell me about today.”

“Hmm… a lot happened. Seriously, *a lot*…”

Just remembering made my face warm again.

“Your face is red—are you okay? Oh, right, you drank, didn’t you?”

“…Yeah, that too.”

She scrolled through her phone, probably still texting her boyfriend even after the call. Watching her, I murmured:

“…What is love, anyway?”

“……Huh?”

She blinked at me, caught off guard.

The only sound left was the ticking of the clock.

The silence stretched on until I couldn’t bear it anymore. When I started to stand up, planning to escape to my room, she grabbed my arm.

“Wait, wait, wait—did my little brother *fall in love*?! You better tell me everything!”

She pulled out two glasses, filled them with ice and poured tea. The clinking of ice echoed as she brought them over, opening the gift box of sweets too.

“Alright! The night’s just getting started!”

Her eyes sparkled as she grinned at me.

Ah, crap… this is gonna be a long night.

I sighed softly, picked up my glass, and took a sip to wet my throat.

Thank god it’s summer break.

On the table, the seashell I’d picked up earlier glinted faintly in the light.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

bro Watarai's whole family is WHIPPED for Hioki and his mother is absolute legend

The music thumped through my chest, vibrating through my body. After a brief pause, the sound of synchronized footsteps and uneven clapping joined the reverberating melody.

"Here comes the Red Team! Their slogan is—"

A lively female voice reached me through the speakers. I clapped my hands against the back of the handheld fan I was gripping and turned my gaze toward the entrance, where a wave of students was heading toward the center of the schoolyard.

Leading them was a student carrying a flag, presumably the team captain, marching with first-years swinging their arms energetically, while sixth-years walked more reservedly, occasionally glancing down with a hint of embarrassment.

September still carried the heavy weight of summer. The stifling heat drained strength even just standing in the open schoolyard. The students, exposed to the blazing sun, must have felt it even more intensely.

Closing my eyes to escape the heat, I focused on the breeze from my handheld fan, though it was barely refreshing. I exhaled softly. Then, I felt another gust from beside me. Lifting my eyelids and turning my head: "Are you okay?"

"…I should be the one asking that."

I gave Watarai a sideways glare through the program pamphlet he was using to fan me. Tilting his head at my comment, Watarai wore an effortlessly calm expression that didn't show a trace of the heat.

Is he even human?

Is there a personal air-conditioning system hidden somewhere? Or is it some ability reserved only for handsome guys?

Curious, I reached out to touch his cheek. His skin clung softly to my hand. Good, he is sweating. Relieved, I slowly withdrew my hand, and Watarai's face broke into a delighted smile.

"You're being awfully bold."

"Ah… I was just… checking."

"Checking if you like me?"

"Checking if you're human."

Our words overlapped. Despite the misunderstanding, Watarai caught my meaning and immediately frowned. I must have confused him.

"I'm always thinking about you," I said, hoping he would understand my intent.

His eyes blinked, and he pressed a hand to his mouth, murmuring softly:

"…I like you."

"…I know."

Seeing Watarai blush faintly made my face heat up as well. It's already hot enough; if it gets any worse, I'll die. I turned my face away, only to hear a deep sigh behind me.

"Are you seriously saying you're not dating?"

I turned to see Morisaki, looking exasperated with a mix of surprise and disbelief. Where did he even get a view of this?

Since he knows about me and Watarai, I had no words to respond. Probably my behavior just now wasn't ideal. I opened my mouth to apologize, but Watarai interrupted.

"Rushing won't solve anything."

I glanced up. Watarai noticed my gaze and smiled warmly.

He's really a good guy. Even though he probably wants clarity as much as I do, he's waiting for me, who asked for time to sort out my

feelings. I genuinely respect that about him.

…but wait.

“I have to make him understand slowly.”

I quickly pressed my lips together and lowered my gaze.

“Hey, why are you lowering your charm like that?”

“I need him to know all of me; otherwise, it’s meaningless.”

“Ha… I see.”

Morisaki furrowed his brows, giving up, and from behind, Nakazato popped his head out.

“The opening ceremony seems over.”

“Next is my little brother’s turn, right?”

Horita, standing next to Nakazato, held up the program. Looking down, I saw that after radio exercises came the 50-meter dash for first- and second-years. Huh, when did the radio exercises end?

Looking toward the entrance, I saw the children lining up as teachers organized them.

“I’m going to film; are you staying here to cool off?”

“No, I want to watch too,” I said, walking up beside Watarai.

He smiled faintly and called out to Morisaki and the others.

“After this, we’ll head straight to my little brother, so come too.”

“Don’t we get a choice to stay cool?”

“As expected of Hioki, the diehard fan.”

“We’re coming, but we want some fan service too～”

Grumbling, they followed us. Watarai exhaled lightly and started walking.

Since the confession at the summer beach (tentatively), not much has changed, but Watarai’s affection is now plainly visible. Even small actions I once ignored now make me conscious of him.

Love is really complicated.

I shook off the lingering confusion and pressed the button to increase the fan's speed.

"On your marks… get set…"

Bang!

As we reached the cheering area near the finish line, the starting pistol for the sprint rang out across the schoolyard. The first group ran partway down the track before the upbeat BGM kicked in, and from the students' cheering section came chants and individual shouts of "Go, go!"

"I'm betting on white next."

"I'll go with red—it looks fast."

"Then I'll go red too."

Is this a horse racing track? Nakazato and the others beside me were fervently predicting which team's kid would win. Glancing at the three of them, I called out to Watarai.

"What group is your little brother in?"

"White. He's in the later rounds."

Even so, I had no idea what he looked like. I just muttered "Hmm" and turned my gaze toward the center of the schoolyard. Kids stumbled along the way, or had to restart after false starts—typical mishaps—but gradually the lines moved forward.

"Ah, isn't that him?"

Horita's voice made me squint at the children at the starting line. Yeah… that has to be him. My gut said I was right. Of course, I focused on the child wearing a white headband, as Watarai had mentioned, but somehow…

"First-years really are that tall and slender…?"

The thought escaped my mouth. Were they really in kindergarten just last year?

"Are you looking at the right kid? He's the far right one."

“Yeah, the far-right one.”

The child with the white headband stood tall for a first-year, with long limbs, radiating the unmistakable aura of Watarai’s little brother even from a distance. I had expected first-years to be chubbier, cuter than stylish, but… the kid next to him was also tall.

Bang!

Startled by the pistol, my shoulders jumped. At the signal, the children took off almost evenly, sprinting toward the finish line. It was such a close race that I couldn’t even tell who was leading.

“Can they tie for first?”

“The teacher’s responsibility to judge is way too heavy.”

“Just let the long legs cross the line first.”

Until just now, Horita and the others had been cheering for the red team, but this time they were fully rooting for white, watching my little brother’s progress intently. The surrounding cheers may have been louder than ever.

As the finish tape was broken and the teacher announced the places, Watarai glanced at his phone, then slipped it into his pocket, lowering his eyebrows slightly. Second place… close, but no cigar.

With my little brother’s turn over, we headed toward the cheering section.

“Objection～”

“Request a monitor review!”

Nakazato and Horita whispered small protests as we walked. Ugh… monster parents… or rather, monster outsiders. I thought bitterly. Morisaki spoke up.

“Wait, Hioki, this is your first time meeting him, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

He didn’t specify who, but probably my little brother. I responded, but Morisaki’s ambiguous tone felt strange. He then shifted his gaze to Watarai.

“You good?”

“…Probably.”

I looked at Watarai, who returned a slightly awkward smile. What is it, only handsome people are allowed to be accepted? If that’s true, I’ll never get to talk to him. Just as I felt anxious, the “monster outsiders” patted my back.

“You’ll be fine! You’re Hioki!”

“It’ll work out! You’re Hioki!”

What kind of encouragement is that? I frowned, and Watarai muttered without turning his gaze:

“Don’t worry, it’s Hioki.”

“…Hioki?” That “it’s Hioki” gives me zero motivation. Yet before I knew it, we had reached the student cheering section. My stomach tightened with sudden nervousness.

“Who’s that?”

“Whose big brother is he?”

While Watarai went to fetch my little brother, I stood behind, and kids occasionally turned to whisper to one another. Of course, a few tall high schoolers standing there would catch anyone’s attention.

Then I heard Watarai’s voice:

“I’ve brought him over.”

“…”

The little boy clung tightly to Watarai’s leg. He stared at me intently, so I tried to smile gently —but he immediately looked away. Even though it’s our first meeting, that stung… quite a bit.

“See, this is Asahi-kun from yesterday. We practiced saying hello, remember?”

Watarai crouched down and held the boy’s hand. The little one glanced at me, then buried his face into Watarai’s shoulder. I took a step back, feeling uneasy, and Nakazato pointed to himself while speaking to the boy.

“Do you remember me? My name?”

“…Yeah. Haru-kun. And also Hayato-kun and Naoku-kun.”

From Watarai’s shoulder, the boy slowly lifted his head and pointed to each person, answering one by one.

“Correct! And this big brother is…?”

“…Ah…”

Horita pointed at me, but the boy looked around nervously, eyes darting, clearly flustered. I forced a smile, trying not to scare him, my facial muscles straining. Then the boy whispered in a tiny voice: “……Hi…kun.”

A voice so small it almost got lost in the surrounding noise. As he tried to look away again, Watarai leaned over, gently stroking his head.

“It’s okay. Say it again.”

Encouraged, the boy timidly looked at me and whispered once more:

“…Asahi-kun.”

He immediately lowered his head again, showing he had reached his limit. Though I couldn’t see his face, his small ears were bright red. Ah… could it be that— “Hey… why don’t you say hi, Hioki?”

At that suggestion, Morisaki gave me a push on the back. My foot scraped lightly against the ground as I took a big step forward. Now that I thought about it, I might have been a bit thoughtless as the older one. Apologizing silently in my head, I crouched down in front of his little brother and looked into his eyes. Despite the slight tremble in his gaze, he met mine.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Hioki Asahi, a friend of… Tsumugi-kun,” I said.

I activated muscles in my face I rarely used, forcing the gentlest smile I could manage. How should one greet someone younger? For now, a handshake seemed appropriate. I extended my hand. Hesitant, the boy gently placed his small hand atop mine.

Holding a hand that was a size or two smaller than mine, he spoke up.

“…W-Watarai… Tsumugi.”

“Tsumugi-kun, nice to meet you.”

“…Nice to meet you.”

“Your sprint just now was really cool.”

“…Thanks.”

He gave a shy little smile and squeezed my hand back. I guessed he was a bashful kid. Not disliked, thankfully—I felt a weight lift off my chest.

As I prepared to release his hand, he gripped mine lightly, holding on. Tilting my head in curiosity, I heard him mutter hesitantly:

“…A-Asahi-kun, I…”

“Whoa! Everything, just like Tsumugi’s big brother???”

“Eh, w-wow! So cool~!”

Before he could continue, a small chorus of other kids called out from behind. Likely Tsumugi’s friends, they swarmed around, asking questions like, “Are you a university student?” or “How tall are you?” I flailed my arms as they peppered me with questions.

“Hey! What grade are you in?”

“Second year of high school.”

“Whoa! That’s… that means you’re an adult!”

Their limited vocabulary was endearing. While one hand was waved around, the other was tugged hard. Glancing down, I saw a pouty Tsumugi glaring at his friends. No fighting, please.

“Tsumugi, aren’t you supposed to get back to cheering? The teacher will scold you otherwise,” I tried to calm him.

Just then, Watarai, looking a little weary, pressed the cluster of first-years onto Horita and the others and spoke.

“Oh! …Okay, I’ll go back.”

“Do your best in the other events too.”

“…O-okay, thanks.”

Waving with encouragement, Tsumugi gave a tiny wave in return. He looked around for the teacher before leading his friends back to their seats. Watching their small backs disappear, Watarai gently squeezed my left hand.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“Overwrite… wait, what were you two talking about?”

“Nothing important. Just commenting on how adult high schoolers are.”

“Hmm.”

He sounded disinterested, despite asking first. I decided to ask him the same question.

“And you? What were you talking about?”

“Whether I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh… that’s a little forward, huh?”

“I do have someone I like… right here.”

“…Haha.”

A dry laugh escaped me. No matter what I did, this was clearly heading down a flirting route. I moved my hand as if to release some of the heat building between us, and Watarai instantly let go.

“So, what should we do for now? Tsumugi doesn’t have any more events for a while.”

“It’s too hot… let’s go buy ice cream,” Nakazato suggested, looking exhausted from handling the first-years in the sun.

Horita and Morisaki chimed in agreement: “Yes, let’s go!” And so we decided to head to a convenience store. We started walking toward the school gate.

“Tsumugi! Wait up!”

As we walked across the schoolyard, a woman’s voice called from behind. Though she addressed Watarai, we all turned. A woman, perfectly equipped for sun protection with sunglasses and arm covers, rushed over. She carried a high-end DSLR on her hip. At Watarai’s

side, she thrust a program booklet toward him.

“Could you help out some kids if they struggle during the borrowed-item race?”

“Ah, sure, that’s fine.”

“And you all too?”

She removed her sunglasses and looked at us. By chance—or not—I met her gaze squarely.

“Oh! Could you be Hioki-kun?”

“Uh… yes.”

“Of course! Nice to meet you, I’m Tsumugi’s mother.”

Ah, so this was Watarai’s mother. Now that she mentioned it, they did seem to share similar eyes. Realizing, I quickly greeted her.

“Mother… nice to meet you. I’m Hioki Asahi.”

“Oh, don’t call me that! Just call me whatever’s easy! Thank you for being friends with Tsumugi. You’re always welcome to come over—”

“Got it, got it! We’re heading to buy ice cream now, so… okay?”

“Oh, sorry! Be careful with the cars!”

Watarai’s mother smiled warmly and waved us off. Horita and the others bowed lightly, saying, “We’ll do our best~,” so I followed suit.

As we left the school gate toward the convenience store, Watarai’s eyebrows furrowed slightly, apologetic.

“Sorry, I tend to talk a lot.”

“No, it’s fine. She’s really lively.”

“Yeah… way too lively, actually.”

Watarai let out a light laugh, and Nakazato chimed in from behind, his voice tinged with curiosity.

“Still, do siblings really not look alike?”

“Now that you mention it, Morisaki seems totally opposite to Ryosho-

san in personality.”

“Yeah, and Hioki doesn’t really resemble your sister either.”

“‘Huh?’”

Everyone except me focused on Morisaki. He snorted as if recalling that night’s incident.

“You had a great gag sense, pretty funny.”

“Forget it immediately.”

My head spun—not from the heat, but from embarrassment. I held my head in my hands as we walked. That night, flustered under Ryosho-san and Konomi-san’s pressure, I’d reacted weirdly, and normally my sister was more composed… though, well, she’s always like that anyway.

As I flitted between embarrassment and grimaces, Watarai laughed beside me, asking, “What’s up?” His laughter was infectious, and I found myself laughing along.

Crossing the street into the convenience store felt like stepping into an oasis. Pure, rejuvenating cool air washed over me. We headed straight for the ice cream section but took a deliberately longer route, savoring the comfort.

“Ahhh, so cool～”

“So, which ice cream should we get?”

“Oh, this one’s limited edition!”

“And there are so many new flavors too.”

Peering into the freezer, we scanned the options. I felt like anything would be fine, but my mouth craved something refreshing over creamy, so I focused on sorbet-style treats.

(Soda flavor might be nice…)

I reached for a popsicle when I noticed the packaging read, “Break and share!” The image even showed two sticks. Ah, this type, huh. Eating it alone could work, but it was too big for one person. I called out to Watarai, who was still debating next to me.

“If you haven’t decided yet, let’s split this one.”

“Eh… o-okay.”

His eyes widened, and then comprehension dawned. His face brightened instantly. It was embarrassingly cute to see him so clearly happy.

Once everyone decided, Watarai took the liberty of paying for the ice cream so as not to inconvenience other customers. Of course, we reimbursed him once we were outside.

We tossed the bag in the convenience store trash and began walking, ice cream in hand. The heat outside remained, but the cold treat made it bearable.

“So, what events does Tsumugi have left?”

“Uh… tug-of-war, borrowed-item race, and dance.”

Horita opened the program while munching his ice cream and suddenly froze. He had been walking ahead, so everyone stopped. Tilting our heads in confusion, Horita removed the ice cream from his mouth and muttered, “Tug-of-war… has it already started?”

“‘Huh?’”

We all crowded over to check the pamphlet. Comparing it to the current time on our phones, the schedule indicated tug-of-war should be later—but a small note showed a change in the start time. The revised start time? Right now.

“……”

Our eyes met, and without hesitation, we all bolted forward.

“No way…! How did we miss that?”

“That’s why they handed out the program today.”

“Which side is Tsumugi on?!”

“Whoa, it’s already in full swing!”

As we neared the school gates, music and rhythmic chants reached us. Definitely tug-of-war. We sprinted onto the school grounds. The parents’ viewing area was full, so we took a spot along the track,

under the blazing sun.

As expected, children with red and white headbands were pulling on the yellow central tape, trying to bring it toward their side. Watarai skillfully held his phone with one hand, aiming the camera at the white team. Based on height, I guessed Tsumugi would be toward the back, so I scanned for him.

“20 seconds left!”

The referee’s voice carried across the field, cueing an even louder cheer. The student leaders waved red and white flags in front of the audience.

Focused on the competition, I suddenly felt cold on my right hand. Looking down, melted ice cream was dripping toward my wrist. I’d completely forgotten it. Hastily, I licked it off before it ran further. My hand was sticky and gross, but I quickly ate the remaining ice cream, letting the chill hit my mouth and sending a sharp, icy pain through my head.

“15 seconds left!”

I wanted to savor it a little longer… I lowered my sticky right hand, just as I was about to turn toward the tug-of-war, and noticed the ice cream in Watarai’s hand. In the sun, it was dripping sugar onto the ground like a tiny sweet rain.

His hand’s going to get all sticky too.

I opened my mouth to warn him, then stopped. Wait—if he’s recording video, my voice might get caught…? I’m not sure if that’s even the right way to think, but some strange sense of consideration filled my brain.

“10 seconds left~!”

I let the referee’s voice wash over me while staring at Watarai’s ice cream. How should I tell him? Talking was out of the question… Should I tug his shirt? Nah, that’d shake the video. Send a message? Too roundabout… and my right hand is too sticky to operate the phone anyway. Whisper? But he might get startled if I did that.

“5 seconds left~!”

As I spun ideas in my head, the ice cream’s drips started inching down

toward Watarai's hand. Whether to tell him or not—my mind raced. My own ice cream was already melted in my mouth, and the sun's rays were baking me alive. My frazzled brain scoured every option. If another version of myself saw me now, he'd probably laugh. Still, for some reason, all I could think about was Watarai's ice cream.

Bang!

The pistol announcing the end of the game fired.

"Sorry."

"Huh?"

As if propelled by the sound, my left hand shot out, grabbed Watarai's wrist, and pulled him closer. I licked the ice cream dripping toward his skin. I might have even touched his fingers with my tongue by accident. For a moment, relief flooded me—I had saved Watarai. Then shame hit immediately.

"Ah, no, this is… sorry! The ice cream was melting, and, well, you were recording, and I didn't know how to tell you…!"

"…Ah, thanks…?"

I flailed through excuses, but Watarai just stared at the ice cream in his hand, saying thanks softly. Meanwhile, new drips made tiny patterns on the ground.

"…Anyway, you should eat it."

"Y-yeah."

Distracted, he popped the rest of the ice cream into his mouth. I… really have no idea what I'm doing. I could have just told him normally and avoided all this panic. Since it was Watarai, I probably wouldn't have been scolded or made him recoil—but with anyone else, I'd have gotten yelled at.

Embarrassment and regret gnawed at me until Horita's voice reached me.

"Hioki, what's up? Your face is red—want to go somewhere shady?"

"Ah, thanks, but I'll wash my hands first."

I smiled and tried to pull myself away, planning to wash my hands

and face and reset.

“Wait, I’m coming too.”

Watarai lined up beside me. I blinked. Huh? Just now? Really? Are you sane? Stunned, I watched him smile and ask, “Is that okay?” and head toward the school building. Honestly, I wanted to be alone, but I had no reason to refuse, so I followed.

The school water fountain area was empty and cool. I twisted the tap, washed my hands and face, and watched droplets drip down my nose and cheeks. Fumbling, I grabbed a handkerchief.

“……”

No, no, wait. This is way too similar to that time at the beach. My heart started pounding as memories of that near-confession hit me.

“Hioki.”

“…! W-what?”

“You okay?”

“Y-yeah, I’m fine.”

Clearly not fine. But if I didn’t tell myself I was, my head would explode. I buried my face in the handkerchief. Watarai’s concerned voice reached me.

“Ah… um, don’t worry, I’m not confessing like that today.”

“Ah… okay.”

“I could, if you wanted me to.”

“No! My heart wouldn’t survive… let’s go back.”

I shook my head and lifted my face. Come to think of it, I’ve been flirted with a lot today… I need to build some resistance. Well, maybe this is fine too? Taking a small breath, I moved forward, and Watarai walked beside me. But the atmosphere wasn’t exactly calm.

“About that ice cream earlier…”

“…Yeah?”

I glanced at him. He gave me a sharp look, and I reflexively turned away.

“Don’t ever do that with anyone else.”

“N-no! It was just the situation… and I thought it’d be okay since it’s you…”

Honestly, I don’t know if it’d work with others. Morisaki would totally reject it, and Nakazato and Horita might not mind outwardly but would probably be internally freaked out. Club members might forgive it… I chuckled at the thought.

I looked at Watarai to apologize, but he was smiling, looking pleased. I tilted my head, confused by his mood swings.

“Did I say something that made you happy?”

“Yeah. Sometimes when you do that ‘because it’s me’ thing, it makes me really happy. Feels special.”

“Ah, so you have your ‘only me’ too.”

“Because I like you.”

“…Sorry, can we… maybe call it a day for today?”

“Even elementary school kids do the ‘borrowed item race,’ huh…”

Horita muttered, watching the children dash around. His eyes weren’t just observing; he was making sure no child was in trouble, just like Watarai’s mother had said. I also scanned for any flustered kids. The challenges seemed designed for their age: things like “family member” or “child whose name starts with ‘A’,” all easy to find. With this setup, it didn’t seem like any adult needed to intervene.

“Ah, Tsumugi picked up the paper!”

Nakazato’s voice was cheerful. Following his gaze, I saw Tsumugi-kun receiving the baton-like sash from the child in front. He held the paper, looking around curiously, but slightly furrowed his brow—he hadn’t found the item yet. Was it too hard?

Could I help him somehow? It seemed the other four were thinking the same. Horita and Nakazato called out to Tsumugi-kun, who immediately brightened at their voices and ran toward them.

Then, for some reason, he stopped right in front of me.

Why?

Next to me, Watarai and Morisaki widened their eyes, staring at him.

“Ah… Asahi-kun, will you come with me?”

Tsumugi-kun hesitated for a moment, then resolutely extended his small hand. I couldn’t tell if it was embarrassment or nervousness—his hand trembled slightly, and his large eyes reflected uncertainty.

“Sure, let’s go.”

I gently took his hand, and his tense expression melted into relief. I wondered what the task was, and why he chose me—but I’d find out soon enough.

“Tsumugi, can I see the paper?”

“No.”

Watarai tried to peek at Tsumugi-kun’s paper, but he clenched it tightly. He tugged at my hand as if urging me along.

“Asahi-kun, hurry…!”

“It should be okay, it’s made for elementary kids. Let’s go.”

“…Yeah.”

I called to Watarai, who frowned suspiciously, and ran with Tsumugi-kun to the front of the assembly platform. Tsumugi-kun handed the crumpled paper to a young teacher in charge of checking tasks. The teacher, mic in hand, started speaking cheerfully.

“Alright, your name please!”

“I’m Tsumugi Watarai from 1st grade, class 2.”

“Thank you! Ah… and big brother, can you tell us your name too?”

“Eh?”

My body froze. Seriously? Isn’t this ridiculously embarrassing? The teacher looked apologetic, which made it even worse. I forced my voice into the mic.

“…Asahi Hioki.”

“And your age?”

“…I’m 17.”

Delete me. From everyone’s memory.

The teacher whispered a small “sorry” and moved on.

“Thanks! Now, Tsumugi-kun’s task is… ‘friends,’ right?”

“Friends.”

Hearing the task, I thought I’d understand why he picked me—but the mystery deepened. Today was our first meeting. Surely other kids would be better choices. The teacher seemed to think the same; she glanced at me, then gave a slightly puzzled look toward Tsumugi-kun. That made sense. Depending on his response, it might be hard to judge if he completed the task.

Looking down at him, Tsumugi-kun grabbed the mic with one hand and began to speak timidly.

“Um… Asahi-kun is… Tsukasa-ku… my brother’s friend, and today, I became his friend too.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! I hope you two become even closer!”

I thought it would end there. Sometimes, innocent children can be unexpectedly sharp.

“Because my brother said he likes you, I think… I like you too, Asahi-kun.”

Tsumugi-kun blushed, shyly smiling. If he’d just answered innocently, the mood might not have been so intense. Though the moment was brief, it felt long. I blinked, then panicked at the sudden confession, hurriedly explaining to the stunned teacher.

“Ah! I mean, when he says ‘like,’ it just means we get along well, nothing more, nothing less…!”

I may have spoken too much. The teacher blinked, then opened her mouth.

“Huh? Ah… right! Sorry, I was surprised! Tsumugi-kun, task

complete! Thank you~!”

Applause erupted, with occasional “cute” from the audience. Following the teacher’s instructions, I left holding Tsumugi-kun’s hand, exhaling the breath I’d been holding. Somehow, I felt twice as exhausted as usual.

I was lost in a daze when his small hand tugged gently. Looking down, I saw Tsumugi-kun staring at me, as if he wanted to say something. I stopped and leaned closer, and his soft, apologetic voice reached my ear.

“…Asahi-kun, was that… bad? Sorry?”

His brows furrowed, and his expression looked on the verge of tears. I had caused him unnecessary worry. I wrapped his small hand with both of mine and spoke sincerely.

“I didn’t mind at all. Thanks for calling me your friend.”

“…Asahi-kun, are you happy?”

“Yeah, I’m happy.”

Meeting his eyes and smiling, Tsumugi-kun returned a grin identical to Watarai’s.

“Asahi! Tsumugi!”

Walking through the shade toward the children’s cheering area, I heard Watarai’s voice, worried and flustered, from behind. Even he seemed confused by what had just happened. He glanced at Tsumugi-kun, speaking quietly.

“Sorry about Tsumugi.”

“No, really, it’s totally fine.”

Smiling to avoid worrying him, Watarai also smiled, still troubled. He then crouched to Tsumugi-kun’s height, and pressed his soft little cheeks between his hands, like marshmallows.

“Tsumugi, that wasn’t right.”

He wasn’t scolding—he was instructing. This wasn’t the usual Watarai; this was the “big brother” version. He supported the kid firmly, making sure he understood. I couldn’t help but admire him—he really

is a good older brother. Watarai continued in a calm tone.

“If you say you ‘like’ someone, you should say it while looking at their eyes. Not there.”

I couldn’t help but let out a small laugh. Seriously… not there. Does he always go silly when I’m involved? Is this what they mean by ‘love is blind’? I couldn’t look at him, and my eyes met Watarai’s mother’s. Wait—she was…

Huh?

If there were a “double-take championship,” I might have won. I thought I was dreaming, so I looked away and back again—but no, it was definitely Watarai’s mother. Her expression was hidden behind sunglasses to block the sun, so I couldn’t really read it.

“…Ah.”

A small sound slipped out, and my body, which I thought couldn’t get any hotter, felt like it was heating up even more. I took a wobbly step back, crouched down, and whispered to Watarai.

“…Your mother is here.”

“Huh? Ah… yeah…”

Watarai turned his face toward his mother and fell silent. No one said a word, and a quiet tension lingered. Just as I started to think maybe we could leave, Watarai’s mother walked slowly toward us. She stopped in front of our crouched forms and removed her sunglasses. Her expression was hard to read—part anger, part concern.

My blood ran cold as I swallowed nervously. She took a small breath and spoke.

“Listen. You two have things to reflect on. We’ll discuss it at home later…”

Despite her serious expression, her soft voice somehow softened the moment rather than ruining the fun of the event. Glancing aside, I saw Watarai’s younger brother trembling like a little puppy, and the older Watarai wearing a slightly displeased look, probably thinking about the “discussion” awaiting him at home. Teenagers in full swing, I thought.

Returning my gaze, Watarai's mother lowered her eyebrows and gave a small smile.

"Asahi-kun, I'm sorry for involving you."

"No, it's fine."

I shook my head vigorously, since it wasn't entirely unrelated to me either. Seeing my reaction, she smiled again. Then, with a sharp clap of her hands, she broke the tension and spoke brightly.

"Now, let's enjoy the rest of the sports festival!"

Whether it was part of her role as a volunteer or as a parent, Watarai's mother headed toward the guest tent. Then, as if remembering something, she exclaimed: "Ah! And one more thing. This is important, so I'll say it now□□…"

She raised a pointed finger. My heart raced with tension as I stared at her, and then she beamed a dazzling smile.

"Don't say 'like'—say 'love'!"

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. It seemed the Watarai family placed the most emphasis on expressing affection. I let out a small laugh, and Watarai, unusually flustered, buried his face and whispered, "Sorry."

□□□

The sports festival was nearing its end.

"Back in first grade, I messed up the dance moves but danced confidently anyway."

"What? I want to see that!"

"Mine got filmed, but it was another kid in the video."

"Sports festivals are full of legends, huh?"

I listened to Nakazato and the others chatting while watching the kids dancing in imperfect synchrony to the popular music. Did I have any sports festival stories? I racked my memory, but the only thing that stuck was how good the post-festival meals were.

"Ah, Tsumugi's coming closer."

Maybe due to formation changes, the kids spread out in a circle on the field. They waved their small arms and legs, occasionally improvising when responding to the audience. Tsumugi-kun, noticing us nearby, lit up with a smile. Just like Watarai when we shared ice cream earlier—definitely siblings.

“Tsumugi, give us a fan service!”

“Camera this way!”

Nakazato and Horita waved, so I waved a little too. Tsumugi-kun paused his moves and waved back. Cute—but was that okay? He didn’t seem to notice the camera, and he glanced at his brother filming.

“Our office doesn’t allow that, you’re banned.”

“Wow, harsh.”

“Call me next time!”

“Does that mean you, Asahi, are banned too?”

Morisaki asked with a teasing smile. I realized that while he wasn’t like Ryo-sho physically, he inherited this mischievous side. Watarai frowned briefly, then remembered something and sniffed proudly.

“Asahi isn’t banned. He personally took me out for a public confession.”

“““True.”””

The borrowed-item race flashed through my mind. Tsumugi-kun had just followed the Watarai family’s rules. It could get complicated if I explained, so I simply muttered, “Thanks.”

“Well, a manager and fan romance is possible too.”

“…Haha.”

Watarai muttered this quietly as he put away his phone. I thought he’d had enough for today —but was he enjoying it now? I let out a sigh that blended with the claps echoing around us. Watching the small line exiting, we headed toward Tsumugi-kun.

Watarai had called him over, but unlike the first meeting, Tsumugi-kun ran toward us smiling. He leapt into my arms, and I caught him

carefully so he wouldn't fall.

"Asahi-kun! Did you see me wave?"

"I saw! You danced really well."

"Hehe, thanks."

Tsumugi-kun smiled and ran over to Horita and the others to get their reactions, checking in with everyone one by one.

"Hayato-kun, how was I?"

"You were amazing! And the fan service too."

"How about Haru-kun?"

"Your dancing was great! Not just waving your hands, but a wink or two would be nice too."

"And Nao-kun?"

"You were really good. Also, you should practice blowing kisses."

Whoa, what are they teaching a first grader?

As I moved to keep Tsumugi-kun away from the "dangerous" high schoolers, Watarai beat me to it and grabbed his hand.

"I said the office doesn't allow it."

Too late, but at least Tsumugi-kun's ears were covered. Inside Watarai's arms, Tsumugi-kun blinked his big eyes rapidly, puffed up his cheeks, and made a sulky face. Then, letting go of Watarai's hands from his ears, he opened his mouth.

"Tsukasa said you should only blow kisses to someone you like!"

""""""Heeey~~~""""""

"Don't look at me."

I grinned at Watarai, who turned bright red and looked away. Today alone, I'd seen him embarrassed twice. The power of family is real.

Watarai shook his head to cool down and looked down at Tsumugi-kun.

“Hi… Asahi-kun and the others are leaving now, so say bye-bye.”

“Eh… already leaving…?”

The puffed-up cheeks from earlier deflated, his eyebrows drooped, and his face twisted like he might cry. Nakazato leaned down and tried to cheer him up.

“It’s okay! We’ll see each other again!”

“When? Tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow… ah! Tsumugi, come to our school festival next time!”

“The school festival is tomorrow?”

“Not this month, next month. Promise, okay? Promise!”

Nakazato extended his pinky toward Tsumugi-kun. Tsumugi wiped his eyes, hooked his tiny finger, and sang, “Yubikiri genman～” (pinky promise).

While singing, he looked reassured, but as soon as the pinky promise was done, his brow furrowed again. Tears started welling up rapidly, and I racked my brain for something to do. Then I remembered.

“That’s right…! Tsumugi-kun, didn’t you want to tell me something?”

“Tell you something?”

“Yeah, when we first met, you were about to say something, right?”

“Hm…? Ah!!!”

Tsumugi-kun suddenly remembered and ran toward the cheering section. Nakazato, Watarai, and the others tilted their heads, curious about what was happening.

“What did Tsumugi go for?”

“…Huh?”

“You don’t even know after saying it yourself?”

“I just asked now because I missed it.”

While answering Morisaki and waiting, Tsumugi-kun came back

holding a bag. Like the borrowed-item race earlier, the mystery only deepened.

Tsumugi eagerly held the bag out.

“A cat from Asahi-kun!”

“Eh… a cat?”

“Yeah!”

When did I give him a cat? And the bag is this size… is it a kitten? Our cat at home hasn’t had kittens…

I fell silent, and Tsumugi-kun stared at me curiously. Clearly, he could tell I was confused. I finally spoke.

“Is it inside here?”

“Hm? No, it’s this.”

Tsumugi showed me a small keychain attached to the bag. A slightly worn maneki-neko (beckoning cat) glinted in the sunlight.

“Oh, this…”

It was the bonus from the school trip. I had given it to Watarai for his little brother… and he’d actually kept it! I felt my cheeks relax naturally, and Tsumugi smiled.

“I’ve always had it on.”

“Really? Thanks for keeping it safe.”

“Yeah!”

I smiled back and patted Tsumugi’s small head. He laughed, “Ehehe,” and showed the keychain to Nakazato and the others.

“This is from Asahi-kun.”

“Wow, a maneki-neko?”

“Oh, I feel like I saw this on the school trip.”

“When did you get spoiled like this?”

As we looked at the cat keychain, Horita’s face lit up.

“Today we say bye, but if you think of this keychain as Asahi, it won’t feel lonely, right?”

“Ah… yeah, we’ll always be together.”

“And Asahi’s face is cat-like too, so perfect.”

It was a stretch, but whatever. I watched Tsumugi. He stared intently at the keychain, glancing at me every now and then. He’d completely forgotten about crying earlier, so this might be my chance. I smiled at him and nodded. He hugged the keychain tightly and grinned.

“Alright, Tsumugi, I’ll see everyone out. Go to the closing ceremony.”

“Okay, bye!”

Prompted by Watarai, Tsumugi waved and ran back to his friends. His small back disappeared toward the entrance as he started walking toward the school gate.

“Not sure why, but being at elementary school makes me feel younger.”

“What kind of 80-year-old comment is that?”

“We’re still high schoolers. I kinda get it, though.”

“Five more visits left, you know.”

We chatted nonsense as we walked, eventually reaching the school gate. It was time to part ways with Watarai.

“Well, see you at school～”

“See ya～”

“Say hi to Tsumugi.”

Nakazato and the others walked toward the station, and I made sure to say a brief thanks so I didn’t fall behind.

“Thanks for inviting me, it was fun.”

“Yeah, glad to hear it.”

Watarai looked relieved, so I smiled back. Just as I was about to leave the gate, a voice called from behind.

“Ah—”

I paused, thinking he forgot something, and turned. Watarai hesitated for a moment, then put on his usual bright smile.

“I love you, Asahi.”

“……Yes.”

Watarai, too, had remained faithful to the family creed. I thought to myself—maybe the Watarai household could use a review of their teaching philosophy.

I muttered this to myself, and the words were carried away by the cicadas’ summer songs, clinging stubbornly to the end of the season.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hioki's confession and school festival preparation!

Matching someone else's energy is difficult. Even more so with about forty high schoolers in the throes of adolescence, each with their own personality.

With only a few days left until the school festival, the classroom wasn't lively—it was tense. Conflicts weren't major, even among girls, but opinions clashed and the air felt subtlety charged.

"Isn't that the wrong color?"

"Why? It looks fine to me."

"Also, we don't have enough fabric. Go get some from another class."

"We just borrowed some the other day. Why not improvise with what we have?"

Sharp words bounced back and forth. Unconsciously, I let my gaze drop, almost avoiding the tension. I had no intention of mediating, nor was I the proactive leader type—I was just a spectator, and honestly, I wanted to leave. My hand repeatedly brushed over the same spot with paint as I muttered to the person next to me.

"Has it always been like this?"

"Ah… I guess it was a bit better before."

The "always" referred to the afternoons before the festival prep period began. Sports club members prioritized their activities, so the cultural club had mostly handled preparations.

After responding, Watarai idly swirled his paintbrush in a cup of water, not painting anything in particular. In short, he didn't feel like doing anything. Likewise, Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki pretended

to work while talking or fiddling with their phones. This group was low-energy. I, on the other hand, had a little motivation—just a little.

I was brought by a class committee member to a pile of cardboard I had no idea what to use for, handed tools, and began painting as instructed.

When the white paint ran out, I stopped and stood up—only to have my arm grabbed.

“Where are you going?”

“Just borrowing some more paint.”

“Ah… I see.”

Watarai’s eyes flicked briefly to the palette, and he let go. I stretched my back from sitting so long and approached a classmate using some paint nearby.

“Sorry to bother you… can I borrow some white paint?”

“White? …Sure, I guess.”

The classmate scowled for a moment before agreeing, radiating obvious displeasure. White paint disappeared quickly and was often hoarded, so I understood the irritation—but his rude attitude annoyed me. I knew if I mirrored it, the atmosphere would get heavier. I wanted to ease the mood, not bow low to a culture club senior—I just spoke instinctively.

“Thanks for the paint. By the way, your painting’s really good. I’m not great at art, so I envy you.”

Trying to sound cheerful, the classmate turned to look at me and blinked. When he smiled genuinely, I worried I might have pushed him too far emotionally—but it seemed fine.

He grabbed my shoulder tightly, trembling, and started speaking.

“Asahi… you’re the only one who praised me…”

“…Oh, really? I thought everyone did.”

“No way! That’s not true! Maybe because you’re in the art club, everyone assumes painting is natural for you—but you’re the first, Asahi!”

“I see… th-thanks for that.”

“Asahi… you’re something else… marry me…!”

“Decline.”

The line came from behind. Turning, Watarai approached with a smile plastered on his face.

“Thanks for the paint.”

He took the white paint and tugged at my jacket. As I stumbled slightly, the classmate’s hand released my shoulder. I thanked him again and returned to my spot, speaking to Watarai, who had begun sulking.

“Is it really that bad if I talk to other kids?”

“…Not bad, but what you just said wasn’t appropriate.”

“It was a joke, right?”

“Then marry me.”

“Huh?”

“Marry me.”

“…No, when you say it, it’s different.”

Because Watarai likes me, right? He wouldn’t take it as a joke. Recently, with his unusually “forward” behavior and childish interactions, Morisaki called over.

“Watarai, you’re being called.”

“…Again?”

Watarai glanced toward the door and sighed deeply. I peeked too—there was a small shadow, probably a girl. Watarai rose and trudged toward the door. Watching his back, I asked aloud.

“Called for what?”

“A confession. A confession.”

Nakazato chuckled dryly. Horita and Morisaki exchanged tired looks.

“This happens every school event.”

“Next time it’ll probably be before Christmas.”

“Then, what about you guys?”

Naturally, popular guys like them were flooded with confessions. I expected the answer, but asked anyway. The three looked at each other and answered with weary expressions.

“I was ambushed at the school gate.”

“I got a challenge-style letter in my locker.”

“At the station… maybe even on the platform.”

Sounds rough. I smirked, imagining it. Morisaki stared at me, then quickly looked away. I tilted my head—he wasn’t going to share.

“What’s up?”

“Ah… nothing major for me, but I guess he’s panicking a little.”

“Panicking about what? Who?”

“You’ll see soon enough.”

I didn’t understand, and Morisaki didn’t offer further hints. I gave up.

“But honestly, it’s annoying.”

“Yeah, you have to be careful too, and it’s exhausting.”

“Isn’t it supposed to end with just a ‘sorry’?”

I suggested a typical way to turn someone down to Nakazato and Horita, who were speaking in hushed voices, and they dramatically shrugged as if to say, “You just don’t get it.” Sorry, I’m new to this whole romance thing.

“They’ll still ask why you rejected them,” Morisaki added, frowning as if remembering something.

“Reasons for rejecting someone? Isn’t it just ‘I don’t like them’ or ‘I don’t know them’?”

“They’ll ask what type you like, on top of that.”

“Apparently they think if they fit your ideal type, you’ll go out with them.”

“Oh…”

My sister had said girls became cute when they liked someone, but I realized they were trying to shape themselves into that ideal to match the person they liked. Impressive, sure—but it also made me wonder. Even if someone molded themselves perfectly to someone else’s ideal and started dating, could they really maintain that perfection forever? People get sloppy, let their guard down. Wouldn’t the other person be disappointed when they glimpsed the real side?

If this were me before, I’d have ignored it—but now that I was involved, my thoughts kept branching out.

“The person who likes me just as I am… that’s the best…”

The words slipped out unconsciously, dropping into the sound-filled classroom like a single note. Yet the friends in front of me heard it, their eyes wide in surprise.

“…Wha—th-think that… or something…”

I forced a joking smile, unable to bear the weird silence, but it didn’t feel like I pulled it off. Gradually, embarrassment crept over me and I lowered my gaze. Someone, please say something.

Before I could wallow in the shame amplified by their quiet reactions, Morisaki’s exasperated voice reached my ears.

“…Are you serious, Asahi? You’re standing so close—”

“Talking about what?”

Before he could finish, a voice called from above. I looked up—Watarai had returned, apparently done with a confession. His lips formed a curve, but his eyes didn’t smile. He must be exhausted. Thinking of his earlier struggles, I felt a little sympathy.

The moment our eyes met, Watarai dropped the pasted-on smile and furrowed his brows.

“What? Did they bully you?”

He addressed me, while his gaze invited an explanation from the three in front of me. I could have denied it, but I just shook my head. The

three immediately started talking at once.

“Wow, Asahi’s gotten mean too.”

“No! He’s just clueless, that’s all.”

“We didn’t do anything!”

“Hmm…”

Watarai sat next to me with an expression that seemed unconvinced and began running his hand over my head, as if checking something. Normally, he’d pull away quickly—but this time, his touch lingered, tracing my head, cheeks, and even ears. Rarely in front of Morisaki and the others, and certainly not in the classroom. This was… new.

A shiver ran through me as his fingers brushed my neck.

“Wai—Watarai, wait—”

I tried to push him away, but then I heard a classmate’s voice nearby.

“Asahi, you’re being called.”

“By who?”

“Huh? Ah…”

The classmate, still confused, pointed to the door behind me. Of course—although I was the one being called, Watarai’s flustered reply had caused confusion. I looked next to me in surprise. Watarai, tense, straightened slightly and looked toward the door, his face tightening. I followed his gaze—there stood a female student I didn’t usually see. She was probably a first- or third-year.

“A confession…?”

Nakazato muttered softly, and Watarai lightly grabbed the hem of my jacket. I traced the hand and saw his eyes full of worry and concern.

“It’s okay,” I said.

“….”

That was all I could say for now. Feeling guilty for keeping him waiting, I gently took Watarai’s hand off my jacket and stood, heading toward the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, it’s fine. Um… I wanted to talk to you a little…”

From her tie and the color of her school sandals, I could tell she was a first-year. Perhaps uncomfortable being on the upperclassmen floor, she lowered her brows and asked, “Can we move somewhere?” I nodded and followed her.

Strangely, I wasn’t nervous. In fact, I felt calm. We walked down the stairs, away from the first-year classroom, to a quiet hallway behind the school. Suddenly, the girl turned around and extended a trembling letter.

“Um… this…!”

Her hand and voice shook. The letter was decorated in pink and white, cute and girly. Seeing the addressee, my suspicion was confirmed.

“Could you please give this to Watarai-senpai?”

I knew it—when I had stood in front of her, I had already sensed she wasn’t aiming at me. Her eyes were not on me, but toward the back of the classroom. Most likely one of those four. I took a quiet breath and accepted the letter.

“Understood. I’ll pass it on.”

“Ah, thank you…!”

“Um, can I ask you one question?”

“Huh? Yes…”

The girl probably hadn’t expected to be asked anything by just a messenger. Her expression quickly shifted to confusion. I gave a wry smile at my own meanness and looked at her.

“What do you like about Watarai?”

“Huh?”

“Ah, no, I don’t mean anything deep. I was just… curious.”

“Oh… I see.”

I knew I had no right to ask such a thing, and that it was something she should discover for herself. Still, I wanted a hint.

After a pause, she carefully considered her answer, cheeks reddening as she began to speak.

“When I first saw him, I liked his face… oh! Of course, it’s not just his face!”

She shook her head nervously. I understood her feelings. First impressions naturally go to someone’s appearance. Whether you end up liking them or not is another matter—but even at first glance, I’d thought Watarai’s face was nice.

She looked up at me, checking my reaction. I smiled to encourage her to continue, and she went on.

“I think he’d treat me well if we dated…”

That made sense. Watarai was known for being single-mindedly devoted, and I had experienced it firsthand.

“He’s kind, and he probably wouldn’t be mean to me…”

Well, there’s that morning incident when he pulled the blanket off me, but that might’ve been because we’re both guys. Still, his kindness made sense—he could be moody, but he usually cared and wasn’t quick-tempered. So other people saw him similarly.

I was about to end the conversation, grateful for her answering my personal questions, but her feelings for Watarai seemed to fuel her words, and she kept talking.

“And he seems modest… not pushy, keeps just the right distance…”

“…Huh?”

Not really. He was usually close, telling people he liked them whenever he got a chance. He held hands, got close—yet maybe it looked normal from the outside. Typical high school boy behavior, I guessed?

Her unexpected words made me involuntarily respond, but she kept speaking without noticing.

“He’s always cheerful, probably not jealous or controlling…”

“….”

Sure, he’s not subtle—but yes, he gets jealous. He seemed aware of it… I mean, he’d even admitted it. Controlling? Well, he did say, “You can’t control me unless we’re dating,” so yeah, a bit controlling.

It seemed the girl wanted to become her ideal version for the one she liked, while still having her own image of Watarai. I wondered what she’d think if she saw the real Watarai.

“For example, if Watarai’s personality wasn’t what you expected, would you be disappointed?”

I knew it was a strange question, but I couldn’t take it back. The girl blinked, looking confused, then hesitantly spoke in a small voice.

“I wouldn’t be completely disappointed… but it might be a little shocking. But! I’d still want to be with him, accepting that!”

“…I see.”

Ah… this girl should be the one dating Watarai, not someone half-hearted like me. Sure, I liked Watarai too—but liking him as a friend and liking him as a lover were on completely different scales. And Watarai deserved someone whose feelings for him were equally strong…

“Thank you for answering so much. I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“I-I’m sorry for getting so carried away… Th-thank you!”

“There’s a teacher on patrol, so be careful and head back to class.”

“Yes! Thank you!”

She bowed politely and walked back the way she came. Her expression seemed brighter, lighter somehow. Once her small figure disappeared, I slumped against the wall.

“….”

I had been slowly realizing it myself. I was aware that I liked Watarai. I just needed to confess—but seeing that girl’s gaze, someone who spent fewer days with him than I did, made me waver. I knew Watarai better, I liked him more…

“Haha… pathetic…”

The words slipped out and hit the floor. The letter in my hands fluttered in the breeze.

If she liked him that much, she could've just told him herself. She had that courage. So why, why did she give it to me?

It hurt.

Love hurts.

Liking someone hurts.

A chime rang in the distance. I exhaled, shook off the heaviness, and stood up.

□□□

It might be the first time I felt scared to return to the classroom. From the hallway, the tension in every class hit me even more. Feeling my mood sink, I decided not to think and stepped in mindlessly. I had only been gone a few minutes. The classroom decorations hadn't changed much in my absence.

Back at my spot, the four stared at me, tense. Everyone but one. Watarai's expression was unreadable—was it worry, anger, or nothing? I couldn't tell. I forced a smile to appear calm.

"Don't give me that scary look. It wasn't a confession—I was just asked to deliver mail."

"Oh, so it wasn't…"

"Mail?"

"Oh, that letter?"

The other three sighed in relief and glanced at the letter in my hand. Its unmistakable appearance screamed "love letter," and their expressions soured again. If only it had been meant for one of them—it would've been so much easier. I chuckled faintly and handed it to Watarai.

"For you, Watarai—from a first-year…"

SLAP

A dry sound echoed.

For a moment, I didn't understand what had happened. I watched the letter drift to the floor, then looked down at my own hand.

I had been rejected—for the first time. By Watarai.

It felt as if our little corner had been cut off from the rest of the world. Me, Nakazato, Hotta, and Morisaki—all of us were staring wide-eyed at Watarai. Yet the one most shocked was Watarai himself. He stared at his own hand as if seeing a completely different creature, the hand that had just pushed mine away. It trembled slightly.

I averted my gaze from him and crouched to pick up the letter that had fallen when he flicked it. Perhaps my movement was the signal—it was like a taut string snapped, and everyone exhaled in unison.

"S-sorry…"

I could only nod faintly.

I wanted to say, It's okay. Or joke, Man, all these confessions are getting depressing, huh? But no sound came. I knew that even a single word would make me cry. My eyes burned gradually.

"Hioki…"

Watarai gently touched my shoulder. I couldn't raise my face; all I could do was stare at the letter. I tried to smile so he wouldn't worry, but my cheeks twitched. Shoulders trembled—I didn't know if it was me or Watarai.

His hand pressed more firmly against my shoulder, and I slowly lifted my face to meet his. Blinking once, tears spilled out.

"Come."

Watarai stood and gently pulled my arm. I stuffed the letter into my pocket, wiped my eyes, and followed him. From behind, I heard Morisaki's voice: "Take your time—"

During cultural festival preparations, many classrooms were empty. Not completely empty, of course—they were like storage rooms, desks and unused materials shoved in. We entered one of these empty classrooms a little away from the others. The door slammed shut with a crisp click. Watarai let go of my arm and faced me squarely.

"Can I hug you?"

“…Yeah.”

I nodded and opened my arms slightly. With an uncharacteristically awkward movement, Watarai wrapped his arms around my back. I wrapped my arms around him, tightening the hold.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I didn’t stop liking you. I just… my feelings got all tangled up, and I reacted without thinking.”

“…Yeah.”

I stroked his back gently, and he hugged me tighter.

“I love you, Hioki. I really, really love you.”

“…Mm.”

I buried my face in his shoulder, pressing my forehead against him. Even though Watarai was expressing his feelings so openly, just hearing that first-year girl’s words earlier made me almost give up facing him. I wanted to escape the pain.

“Sorry…”

I pulled away slightly. Losing that support, I slumped to the floor, my words falling with me. Watarai crouched next to me, listening.

“…I… I wavered just from talking to that girl.”

Tears ran down my cheeks; my voice shook. But I couldn’t stop the tears or the words anymore.

“She spoke seriously about why she likes you… and I thought… maybe someone like her should be with you instead.”

From the corner of my eye, Watarai’s hand twitched. Maybe I’d upset him. I couldn’t lift my face, and tears kept streaming.

“I thought… I should end it… it’s too painful… I don’t want to worry about it anymore…” Bit by bit, I lost track of what I was saying, what I wanted to convey.

“But… even though I tried to give up, if you reject me… it hurts so much my mind goes blank…”

My throat convulsed. Pain. I couldn’t breathe. My chest ached unbearably. I’d cried telling Watarai my feelings before, at the beach.

I'd promised to try to find the answer, asked for time—but that only tightened the knot around my neck. There was never a correct answer. Waiting changed nothing.

"…I'm sorry for being reckless and not thinking about how much you were struggling too."

I heard Watarai's gentle voice. I wiped my eyes and looked up to see him giving me a troubled smile. That wasn't what I wanted—I didn't want him apologizing. I dragged my body closer and wrapped my arms around him tightly.

"No… even though you've said countless times that you love me… it's me who…"

"Yeah."

He responded while shifting so I was fully enclosed in his arms. His hand brushed the pocket where I had the letter, making a faint rustle. That sound seemed to trigger something; tears streamed like a child's.

"I know Watarai better than… that girl… I know you better… I love you… so much more than she does…!"

"Yeah… mm?"

The hand stroking my back froze. Feeling an unexpected emptiness, I hugged Watarai tighter, my heartbeat thudding violently through my body. He drew a deep breath, put a hand on my shoulder, and gently pushed me back a bit.

"Hioki, what did you just say?"

"Huh? Just… I said I know you better than she does."

"Yeah, but after that?"

"After… I love you… more."

My thoughts stalled. My brain refused to process the words. Love. I'd said it—I did say it.

"Ah… I mean…"

"It's fine. True or not, I heard you say you love me. That's enough for today."

He flopped back onto the dusty floor without care, covering his mouth and letting out a small laugh. “Haha.” He giggled quietly for a while, shoulders shaking. I watched blankly.

“…Is it really that funny?”

“Huh? Ah, no. I just felt relieved, so I laughed.”

“Relieved?”

“Yeah, I’ve been panicking lately.”

Morisaki’s words flickered through my mind: “He’s probably panicking too.” It clicked. “During events like this, I get confessed to a lot. Like making memories,” Watarai continued. “…Making memories?”

“Yeah. Proving you’re having fun. And getting a few confessions, I started worrying. I thought, maybe Hioki felt like this too. Even from someone he didn’t like, he’d take it seriously.”

“….”

“…I imagined you might say yes even if you didn’t like them. I just wanted you to pick me quickly, so I panicked.”

He laughed quietly again. So that strange feeling I’d sensed recently—it was this.

I wiped the last of my tears and looked up. Watarai smiled innocently, like a child who’d gotten a new toy, bright and dazzling.

“It’s not a lie.”

“Huh?”

“I love you, Watarai.”

“…Yeah, thanks.”

He withdrew his hand from his mouth, stretched out, and patted my head. His gentle touch made me squint, and he stroked my ears and cheeks with a satisfied smile. When his hand brushed my lips, my shoulder twitched, but I didn’t pull away. He explored the feeling softly, then moved his hand to the back of my head, pulling me close.

I didn’t even have time to get nervous in the natural flow. It’s my first

kiss, I thought as our lips were about to meet—when the door suddenly burst open.

Huh? Now?

“Sorry to interrupt, but could you come back now?”

Frozen just centimeters from Watarai, I looked up at Morisaki. He tilted his chin toward the classroom. Overreacting isn’t great, but doing nothing feels awkward too.

“You timed this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

Watarai frowned, and Morisaki smiled, walking back to the classroom. Once he disappeared, I relaxed, resting my head on Watarai’s chest. His heartbeat felt faster than before. Watarai seemed a little flustered too.

“…Shall we go back?”

“Wait.”

When I tried to stand up, Watarai grabbed my arm. My face was gently held in place, and something soft brushed against my skin.

“Huh?”

I didn’t understand what was happening and instinctively touched my cheek.

“You just… kissed me?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Oh…”

I touched my cheek again, the place where he had kissed me. Gradually, warmth spread across my face. And now we were about to go back to the classroom—how could this happen?

“By the way, I only kiss people I like. That’s my motto.”

Watarai said that and stood up, extending his hand. That reminded me of Tsumugi-kun, who had said something similar. They take their mottos far too seriously. I sighed inwardly and grabbed Watarai’s

hand to stand.

Something fell from my pocket.

“Ah…”

The letter I had kept in my pocket, slightly bent, landed on the floor with a soft flap. I crouched to pick it up and hesitantly asked Watarai:

“D-do you want it?”

“…It’s addressed to me, so I’ll take it.”

Watarai received it with an expression of extreme displeasure. Honestly, I’d feel the same if I received a love letter meant for me from someone else. Feeling slightly guilty, I let out a small laugh. Watarai’s lips curved into a soft smile.

———

Back in the classroom, the voices of the festival committee echoed.

“The costumes and class T-shirts have arrived! Try them on! If sizes don’t fit or there’s any problem, tell us here!”

With that, a cardboard box thumped onto the teacher’s desk. Classmates crowded around, excited about the finished costumes.

“Let’s go grab ours too～”

Nakazato called out, so we moved toward the desk. After receiving our costumes and T-shirts, we waited until the girls moved to another room before changing.

“Wow, it’s like the Caribbean!”

“I know, right? And the fabric’s sturdier than I thought.”

“The vest’s a bit tight, but whatever.”

Our class theme was “Halloween Café.” Not everyone wore whatever cosplay they wanted; to keep uniformity, we dressed as medieval European nobles with frilled shirts and vests, adding small touches like devil horns or wolf ears. The girls had longer maid dresses. It wasn’t particularly flashy, but the focus was on quality.

“Hioki, put this on… and this too.”

After finishing most of the change, Watarai placed wolf ears on my head. It wasn't much different from the headbands we'd worn on our school trip, but this time there was also a tail. Watarai clicked a belt around my waist, and the tail swayed behind me. I touched it—it was soft and fluffy.

"So cute."

Watarai murmured this while touching the tail. I glanced at him—he was smiling, cheerful even amidst the tense atmosphere. I returned his smile just as Nakazato and the others' voices reached us.

"Ah, nice. I'll pick that too~"

"There aren't many accessories, though."

"You can't wear earrings with it?"

The three of them rummaged through the box, choosing decorations they liked. Watching them, a classmate's voice called to me, like déjà vu.

"Hioki, you're being called~"

"By who?"

"Huh? Oh, your club…"

This time it wasn't a classmate but someone from my club. And, like before, it wasn't me asking "Who?"—it was Watarai. He gave a small relieved smile and said, "Be back in three seconds."

I thought, Again with this impossible timing, and started stepping forward—then froze. Wait, in this outfit? Meeting them like this, outside of the festival day, would be so embarrassing. I grabbed my shirt to change when a voice came from the door.

"Hi-o-ki-kuuun! Hurry up or we'll decide the shifts without you!"

"If you're last, you'll have to do cleanup too~"

"Come in one second!"

Terrible. Absolutely terrible. I dropped my shirt and rushed to the door, shaking off the embarrassment and confronting Tsujiya and the others.

“Whoa, what’s with the makeover?”

“Changed your vibe from wannabe popular to… what now?”

“Whoa, your tail’s fluffy!”

“…Just tell me the matter quickly.”

I grabbed Minase’s wrist as he reached for the tail, frowning. Tsujiya handed me a piece of paper. Glancing at it, I saw the heading: Club Reception Shift.

“Wait, we’re the reception staff?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“Other clubs also take shifts, so it’s just one session per person,”

“But like I said, the last shift has cleanup too.”

Minase hadn’t let go of the tail, so I looked over the shift sheet. Only 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. slots were open.

“Why’s it almost full?”

“…Apparently the advisor forgot.”

Ino chuckled. Seriously, advisor, get it together. Since the final slot was 4 p.m., there wasn’t even time to think—I wanted the 11 a.m. shift…

“Since you came to tell me, something’s up, right?”

“Well… the rest is either us or first-years.”

“Wondering what kind-hearted Hioki would think～?”

“Hope he doesn’t feel guilty～?”

I thought of my juniors. Even if it was the advisor’s oversight, they wouldn’t want the last shift either. If Tsujiya and the others had just assigned it themselves, I wouldn’t have cared— but they deliberately came to me.

“So, what about you guys? …Alright, let’s say together which time is good.”

They looked reluctant, so I forced their opinions.

“One, two—”

“11 a.m.!” “11 a.m.!” “11 a.m.!”

Sorry, juniors. The seniors aren’t being kind. The time was said confidently, and I could only smile. It wasn’t something to ruin our relationship, but I felt a creeping guilt. Tsujiya noticed too and quickly changed the topic.

“Okay, I’ll tell the advisor. By the way, what’s your club doing?”

“Huh? Oh, Halloween Café.”

“Oh, perfect for the season!”

“What are you selling?”

“Uh… I think cookies and crepes.”

Even while asking questions, Minase couldn’t resist touching the tail; he’d been running his hands along it the entire time. Honestly, the vibrations from the tail through the belt to my waist were ticklish.

“Eh, does it feel that good?”

“That’s unfair, only Minase gets to do that!”

Tsujiya and Ino also tugged and poked at the tail. The tail’s movements became bigger, and the vibrations against my waist intensified. I thought about taking off the belt and letting them touch it freely. Just as my hand moved toward the belt, someone suddenly pulled my shoulder backward.

“No touching,”

Watarai’s low, displeased voice reached my ears. I turned to see him narrowing his eyes, staring at Tsujiya and the others. They froze, looking at me with expressions somewhere between confusion and fear—they didn’t understand why they were being warned. Makes sense—they didn’t know Watarai liked me.

I tried to think of how to explain Watarai’s jealousy, but surprisingly, Minase spoke first.

“Wait, isn’t that… your decision?”

“Huh?”

Watarai murmured something even lower in his ear. A few seconds of silence passed, the air thick and heavy. I opened my mouth to intervene, but Tsujiya and Ino cut me off.

“Exactly! We’re not trying to steal Hioki!”

“Yeah, we get that you’re jealous that Hioki’s close to us…”

Ino’s voice trembled slightly, probably from nerves. He paused mid-sentence, then suddenly realized something.

“Ah… I get it. You’re jealous! Because we’re friends with Hioki!”

“Ah, so that’s it. Why didn’t you just say so sooner?”

“But that doesn’t change anything! We’re friends, after all!”

This was the worst. They were pouring fuel on the fire. Tsujiya and the others snorted like stubborn elementary school kids, then started bragging.

“We were together in middle school too, so you probably don’t know about Hioki standing up by mistake during the graduation ceremony during ‘Students, rise!’”

“That was you, though.”

“Or that one time at camp when Hioki wore his shirt inside out all day?”

“Also you.”

“And taking dessert jellies from Hioki’s lunch during break just for fun?”

“Also… wait, what? I never heard that!”

I was exasperated that these three were shoving my embarrassing memories at me, but the last one I couldn’t let slide. I let go of Watarai’s hand, grabbed Tsujiya’s shoulder, and shook him front to back.

“…Why are you confessing so casually?”

“Yes.”

“…You should probably apologize first.”

“I’m sorry.”

“…No, I mean, the flavor.”

“Huh? That?”

“Just tell me the flavor.”

“Uh, mandarin… with pulp.”

Of course, with pulp. So it wasn’t bite-sized, but the bigger kind… I stopped shaking him and glared. Tsujiya looked at me and gave a cheeky grin.

“Sorry, Hioki.”

“Maybe I should quit being friends.”

“…I see. So, from friends to best friends, then.”

“Why are you promoting me?”

So annoyingly positive. I let go of Tsujiya’s shoulder and held my head. From behind, I heard laughter:

“Ahaha!”

I turned to see Nakazato and Horita peeking from behind Watarai, tears of laughter in their eyes.

“Wait, this is hilarious.”

“You guys are really like this?”

They stepped into the hallway facing Tsujiya and the others and took out their phones.

“If we’re friends, right?”

“I know Tsujiya and Ino’s accounts, but… I don’t know Minase’s, so tell me.”

The three exchanged glances and shrugged with a condescending what-can-you-do attitude. They quickly scanned the QR codes. I stepped back, looking at Watarai, who was dumbfounded.

“Watarai, you should be friends too.”

“…We’re already mutually in love, you know. Above best friends.”

“Ah… yeah. Sorry.”

I patted Watarai’s head to calm his sulking expression. He stared back at me intently. Tilting my head, I realized he muttered softly, covering his mouth: “…Oh no, I almost kissed you just now.”

“Don’t go losing your mind. Also, aren’t you worried we might have posted some unexpected pics of Hioki? Isn’t it okay not to be friends then?”

From behind, Morisaki stuck his head in and wedged himself between Watarai and me. He then joined the group and spoke to Tsujiya and the others.

“I want to, and him too.”

Morisaki glanced at Watarai. Watarai hesitated, probably embarrassed about the previous near-kiss. Seeing that, Tsujiya and the others smirked.

“Hioki’s pictures go back to middle school; we can show them if you want.”

“And during club activities and in private too.”

“Of course, as long as you’re not cold to us.”

“““So, what do you say?”””

“Friends?”

Watarai immediately nodded and pulled out his phone. While he was slightly wary of how we might “expose” him, he relaxed knowing we could get along.

As the seven of us exchanged contact info, I leaned against the wall, waiting idly. Ino raised his hand and beckoned me.

“Come on, Hioki. Let’s take a photo to commemorate being friends.”

Following Ino’s lead, we lined up in the hallway, clearly blocking the path. Well, whatever, I thought, approaching the group. Minase tugged my arm.

“You’re here, Hioki.”

“Ah… yeah.”

Standing next to Watarai, I smiled at him, and he returned a soft, gentle smile. I really do like Watarai when he’s just being himself. While thinking that, I glanced at Ino’s phone and noticed he was struggling a bit to fit all eight of us into the frame.

“Hey, anyone with long arms over here?”

“Morisaki, help me out.”

“Wait, where are you? I still can’t match faces to names.”

“I’m Morisaki. Move over a bit.”

“Shouldn’t we squeeze together more?”

“And we gotta take it before the teacher comes.”

I couldn’t keep track of who was saying what, but after some repositioning, we finally managed to get all eight of us into the frame. Morisaki raised the phone, and Horita spoke up.

“1 plus 1 is～?”

“Two～～”

With a shout reminiscent of the “arithmetic uncle” from our school trip, the camera clicked. Hearing our voices echo down the hallway was embarrassing, but it was fun enough that I didn’t care.

We gathered around the phone to check the photo. Tsujiya, Ino, and Minase all muttered in unison:

“”””Kinda feels like celebrities and regular people”””

Probably because we were in costume. Compared to our usual jerseys, it was definitely flashy. Feeling a bit sympathetic for the three of them, I heard a voice from behind.

“What are you doing? It’s not break time.”

Turning around, our homeroom teacher was standing there on patrol. We quickly hid the phone behind our backs and forced smiles. Tsujiya started talking nervously.

“Sorry～! We were just passing along some club info.”

“We’re done now, so we’ll head back!”

“Excuse us～!”

Ino and Minase bowed politely and returned to their classroom. As I followed, the teacher scanned us from head to toe, then muttered:

“The teacher of the class with the highest sales gets a prize. I’m expecting big things.”

With that, the teacher resumed their patrol and headed toward the stairs. Judging by their gleaming eyes, it must be a pretty tempting prize. We exchanged looks and shrugged.

“Wonder what the prize is.”

“Since it’s teachers, probably alcohol or something.”

“Extra vacation days maybe?”

We let our conversation drift while Watarai suddenly turned back, smiling brightly.

“Hioki, there aren’t any after-school club activities during this period, right?”

“Yeah, none.”

“Then let’s go home together.”

“Sure, but… are we going somewhere with everyone first?”

“Huh? No, just the two of us.”

“Just the two of us?”

Watarai paused briefly, then nodded.

“Because I want to be with you, even just a little.”

He said it with a soft smile. I realized then—just walking home together made him this happy. Watarai’s cuteness made my cheeks warm, and I couldn’t help smiling.

With only a few days left until the cultural festival, the tense

atmosphere is still around, but now I have a reason to look forward to school. My heart was already fluttering at the thought of the coming days.

…Though, I feel like I might be forgetting something. Well, whatever.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Watarai is so obsessed with Hioki he even styles his hair with his oil so they would

smell the same

The entire school was brimming with energy.

From all around came calls from attraction booths, cheers, and sometimes even screams from classes running haunted houses.

As I sat in the vacant classroom that had been assigned as our waiting room, idly looking through the pamphlet with the sounds from the hallway as my background music, a shadow fell over me.

"See anything that catches your interest?"

"Nah, just wondering if there's anything fun."

I looked up to find Watarai, clad in his costume, standing there. It wasn't like during the fitting the other day; now he was fully accessorized, his hair styled. The power of a handsome guy is terrifying. He was so radiant that if he'd said we were heading for a photoshoot right then, I wouldn't have found it strange at all. The same went for Horita and the others, who were preparing in the background. Watarai smiled at me, silent and staring, then pulled a nearby chair over and sat down beside me. He leaned his well-proportioned profile in close to peer at the pamphlet. Watching him scan the gymnasium stage program, I spoke.

"You look cool."

"Thanks."

"Like an idol."

"Haha, what's that?"

When Watarai laughed, the ear cuff decorating his ear shook with a faint, metallic rustle. It was intricately engraved, making it sparkle. I leaned in to see what the design was, and a faint, softly sweet scent tickled my nose.

"Hey, did you... change your hair oil?"

"Huh? Ah... yeah, I did. Actually, I forgot to buy more of the old stuff, so I'm using a different one today."

"Oh, really?"

"...You don't like this one as much?"

"Huh? No, I like it."

Maybe our tastes were just similar. Both his previous scent and this new one were surprisingly pleasant. Or maybe it was just because it was Watarai wearing it. Thinking that, I met his eyes and smiled. He responded with a meltingly warm smile of his own.

"I like it too."

"...Yeah."

Knowing him, he probably wasn't just talking about the hair oil. I couldn't bear the implication in his expression and words, and dropped my gaze back to the pamphlet. But then Watarai said, "You're cute," and combed back the hair that had fallen over my bowed face, so my ears, flushed scarlet, were probably a dead giveaway. As I grew even more embarrassed and tried to brush his hand away, the window facing the hallway slammed open with a bang.

"Hioki-kun~! We're here to pick you up~!"

"It's time for Reception Pretend~!"

"And stop seducing the handsome guys already—"

"....."

The sound of the window sliding shut, slowly and quietly, echoed through the room. Then, a moment later, it was flung open again with just as much force. *What's with these guys? What's going on?*

"Whoa, that was close. Thought I'd stepped into the wrong dimension for a sec."

"More like, this is some kinda green room backstage."

"You here for a shoot on the side, during the festival?"

Maybe they shared my sentiment, because Tsujitani and the others stared openly at Watarai and the others in their costumes, then shot them jealous looks. They were probably envious. They did look good.

I checked my watch, stood up, and spoke to Watarai beside me.

"Want to go part of the way together?"

"I'll go."

Watarai answered immediately, standing up with a clatter. I couldn't help but smile at his obvious happiness, then called out to the three in the back.

"Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki, you guys come too."

"Feels like that time at Tsumugi's sports day."

"For us, it's not 'Want to go?' but 'Let's go,' huh～?"

"No options, it's enough to make a guy cry."

Even as they complained, the three came over to the door, phones in hand. I let out a small laugh at their kindness hidden beneath the grumbling, then turned to Tsujitani's group.

"You guys wanna go on ahead?"

"Eh, why? That should be 'Let's all go together!'"

"Besides, *we're* the ones who came to get you."

"Cruel! As expected, Hioki only lets the handsome guys win."

"No, that's not it. I was just wondering if you'd be okay."

"Haah?"

Tsujitani and the others stared back at me with blank, confused expressions, as if I'd spoken in riddles.

"...Okay, okay. My life points are at zero."

"...I'm barely hanging on."

"...Ah, mine just went into the negatives."

I heard the voices of my clubmates from behind, drained of all vitality. Glancing back as I walked, I saw the three of them, looking like they'd aged as much as Urashima Taro all at once.

I remembered a conversation we'd had once. They'd said that the three of them combined had a battle power of 30, but when you added me, it dropped to 20. *Maybe it really is my fault*, I thought with a wry smile, when a voice came from beside me.

"Stop looking around, you'll trip."

"Yeah."

"Want to hold hands?"

"It's embarrassing, so not now... but it's okay as long as Watarai is next to me."

"...I see."

Watarai's eyes widened for a moment, then he smiled happily and turned to face forward again.

I'm pretty sure he interpreted my "as long as Watarai is next to me" as "if I'm about to trip, Watarai will save me."

Of course, that wasn't wrong. If I actually looked like I was going to fall, he'd naturally offer his hand and help me. But that wasn't the only advantage of having Watarai by my side. I also turned forward and stared down the hallway. It was weird already. For the end of the hallway to be so clear and visible, in a corridor bustling with energy, students, and visitors, was abnormal.

"(Handsome guys are insane...)"

I was impressed all over again.

When we'd first left the classroom-turned-waiting-room and started walking, it was normal. But gradually, people began parting to the left and right for us. Like Moses and the Red Sea. The girls, especially, kept their eyes glued to Watarai and the others even after they'd passed. Occasionally, I even heard muttered exclamations of "...Whoa" from the guys.

They stood out. More than usual. And being out of uniform made it

even more pronounced. Tsujitani and the others apparently couldn't handle the attention... Well, no, they were following along, even if they were turning into corpses. That's why I'd asked. I wasn't exactly used to it either, and while I felt somewhat uncomfortable, I was grateful for the easy passage.

When we reached the Class 5 classroom, it was Tsujitani's group who let out the deep sighs of relief. Their complexions gradually improved, like travelers who had finally found an oasis.

"You guys okay?"

"Nope."

The three shook their heads weakly and shuffled unsteadily toward the staircase. Maybe they'd decided that some outside air would revive them. I needed to get to my reception job, so I spoke to Watarai and the others.

"Alright, I'm heading off."

"Come straight back when you're done."

"Good luck with reception!"

"Try to sell out before Hioki gets back."

"Let's check out the other places when you get back~!"

I nodded at the four of them and left the classroom, which was starting to get crowded. Stepping out into the hall, I was surprised by the number of people. *Could this line be for our class?* I couldn't help but laugh at the four of them, whose mere presence was a walking advertisement.

Handsome guys really are something else.

When I reached the entranceway, I first checked in with the teacher in charge of reception and had him mark me present on the attendance sheet—apparently to see who was slacking off.

Next, I went to relieve the students at my assigned post. The color of the designated slippers indicated they were for the highest grade.

"It's about time, so I'll take over."

"Hey, thanks."

"Can you walk me through the reception stuff?"

"Sure. The order doesn't really matter, but first you give them this pamphlet——……"

The third-year senpai finished the explanation and headed back into the school building. I looked down at the papers on the desk. There were sections for Alumni, Parents, and General Public, each assigned a color that corresponded to the colored wristbands placed at the end. *I see, so I just hand these out accordingly.* I was mentally organizing what I'd been told when I checked my watch. The long hand pointed to 57 minutes past the hour.

"Haah... I thought I was gonna die."

"That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, I think."

"I'm amazed you held up so well, Hioki."

As I gazed toward the school gate, the entrance point, Tsujitani and the others lined up beside me, having regained their usual composure.

"You're late. You left before me."

"Ran to get some water from the fountain."

Mizunase said this, then tilted his head. "So what do we do at reception?" As I started giving the three of them a rough explanation, the voice of the teacher in charge called out from behind.

"Hey, hey, less chatting, more working."

"Yeees, ma'am."

We hadn't exactly been slacking off, but we gave a half-hearted reply and turned our attention to the stream of visitors. There were people from all walks of life, from babies to the elderly. I was trying to remember what time my mom and sister said they'd come when a bright, familiar voice I hadn't heard in a while reached my ears.

"Asahi～! I came!"

"Anna. Welcome."

Standing before me was Ikegetani.

She'd chosen her high school for the uniform, and today she was

wearing her favorite uniform, not casual clothes. I smiled, thinking she must really like it, then shifted my gaze to the girl next to her.

The quiet-looking girl, presumably Ikegetani's friend, who was standing beside her, saw me and gave a polite little bow. I bowed back instinctively, then turned to face Ikegetani.

"A friend?"

"Yep, that's right! From high school!"

Ikegetani peeked at the girl beside her and answered with a smile. Muttering "Huh~," I marked two circles in the 'General Public' column and handed over two pamphlets and paper wristbands.

"By the way, how'd you know the culture festival was today?"

"Ah~! That? Watarai-kun told me. In a DM."

"Eh?"

As she put on the wristband she'd received, Ikegetani smiled happily, as if remembering something.

I watched her, my head tilting in confusion. Why were Watarai and Ikegetani in contact? It was Ikegetani who had asked for his daylog account, but I'm pretty sure Horita said you had to be mutual followers to exchange DMs.

It wasn't a problem if the two of them got along... but. I kept staring at Ikegetani, my feelings unsettled. Noticing my gaze, Ikegetani started and waved her hands and head exaggeratedly.

"Ah, wait, no it's not like that! Forget what I just said, please!"

"That just makes you seem more suspicious."

"Ugh... Tsujitani-kun! Ino-kun! Make Hioki lose his memory! Okay, bye!"

" "No idea what's going on, but okay." "

Ikegetani rattled off her words in a rapid-fire burst, then grabbed her friend's hand and hurried into the school building. I watched the two of them go with a scowl, then *pokk*, someone tapped my head.

"Ow, what was that for?"

"Huh? Well, Ikegetani said to, didn't she?"

" 'Make him lose his memory.' "

"It was obviously a joke."

I furrowed my brow even more, and Tsujitani and Ino laughed heartily. I paid them back with a sharp slap on their backs, when a familiar voice called out.

"Now, now, you shouldn't bully your friends."

"Ah! Sis~! Save us~!"

Tsujitani and Ino turned to face the newcomer, rubbing their lower backs—or maybe their waists, since their backs were too stiff to reach—with exaggerated sympathy. I also turned to face my second-oldest sister, Wakaba.

She looked worlds different from her bare-faced, loungewear self at home. Women are truly amazing.

Wakaba gave a light laugh and held up three fingers. "Three of us~!" I could see my oldest sister, Minami, and my mom walking up behind her.

"You don't need a pamphlet, right?"

"Nope, we got one from A-kkun already."

"Got it."

I marked three circles in the 'Parents' column and handed over the wristbands. Then, Minami peeked out from behind Wakaba. She was also dressed and made up with clear effort.

"Hii-kun, what time will you be at your class?"

"I'll go after this job is done... but you don't have to come."

"What are you talking about~? I came all this way for you, Asahi."

Beside Minami, my mom looked on with a troubled, slightly downturned smile. I mean, I get that, but... I wish they'd be more considerate of a teenage boy's feelings. I told them the time in a voice just barely above a whisper, and the three of them waved at me and Tsujitani's group with smiles before heading into the school building.

"Maybe I'll go when A-kkun is on shift too."

"Me too, I'm gonna go get my 'Hii-kun Moe Moe Kyun'."

"I wanna get S-kkun's cheki~."

"Hey, stop it. And who's 'S-kkun'?"

It's what they always call me, so I usually let it slide, but the thought of my friends hearing it was unbearably embarrassing.

I had no choice. Should I give these guys amnesia after all? Feeling the heat rush to my face, I moved to knock their heads, when a cute voice called out from a distance.

"Asahi-kun! Asahi-kun!"

"Ah, Tsumugi-kun."

The bag I'd seen at the sports day slung over his shoulder, Tsumugi-kun came running toward me with a radiant smile, leaving his mother behind. The keychain I'd given him jingled from his zipper.

"Asahi-kun! Hello!"

"Hello, thanks for coming."

"Yep!"

Tsumugi-kun gave another bright, *Nipa*~ smile. Unconsciously softening my expression, I marked two circles in the 'Parents' column and handed over the wristbands.

"Can you put it on?"

"Mmm-nn."

"Then give it to your mom."

"Asahi-kun, you do it~!"

I tried to look at Watarai's mom, who was walking up behind him, but Tsumugi-kun thrust out his small, slender arm. Completely taken in by his expert撒娇 (sajiao - act cute/coax), I leaned out from behind the reception desk.

"Hioki's cousin?"

As I fastened the wristband, Mizunase looked back and forth between me and Tsumugi-kun. Tsujitani and Ino also started comparing us.

I finished clipping the wristband, pulled back, and shook my head.

"Nah, Watarai's little brother."

"Huh～"

As I said this and looked at Tsumugi-kun, he, perhaps startled by the sudden attention, clung to his mother's leg and stared fixedly at Tsujitani and the others. Thinking it rude to stare too much, I turned to face his mother.

"Do you need a pamphlet?"

"No, we're fine. We'll be sure to stop by Hioki-kun's class too!"

"Okay, we'll be waiting for you."

Watarai's mom smiled, then gently pushed Tsumugi-kun, who was still wrapped around her leg, as they headed into the school. Halfway there, Tsumugi-kun turned back and waved, so I smiled and waved back.

"Don't tease him too much; he's shy."

"Who's shy?"

I'd meant that as a warning to Tsujitani and the others, but the reply came from a different direction. Hearing another familiar voice, I fearfully looked up.

"L-long time no see."

"What's with the formal talk?"

"It has been a while."

I was met with the sight of Ryoto-san, wearing a mischievous grin, and Kokon-senpai, whose expression hadn't changed a bit.

The two of them gave off an aura of urban youth that didn't fit this rural high school; in a way, they stood out. Tsujitani and the others beside me had taken a step back, perhaps overwhelmed.

Ryoto-san glanced at them, grinned, then turned back to me and

spoke.

"So, who's shy?"

"Ah, well, uhm... Me, I guess?"

"Why's it a question~?"

I marked one circle each in the 'Parents' and 'General Public' columns and handed over the wristbands. Ryoto-san laughed, took them both, and deftly fastened one onto Kokon-senpai's wrist.

I stared intently at Ryoto-san as he put on his own wristband. For some reason, my instincts were screaming that Tsumugi-kun and Ryoto-san should never meet.

"Asahi, when's your class shift?"

"It's already over."

"Well, I asked Nao, so I already knew."

"Ahaha..."

Then why did you ask?

My lie was pointless. I let out an evasive laugh, and Ryoto-san flashed another mischievous grin, stretched out his long arm, and ruffled my hair. Then he headed into the school building with Kokon-senpai in tow.

"Hioki, what's up with your social connections?"

"Are you one of *those* people?"

"Damn, my knees are shaking at a seismic intensity of 6."

When Ryoto-san and Kokon-senpai were out of sight, Tsujitani and the others let out a breath and then spoke to me.

I fixed my disheveled hair and gave a weak laugh.

"They're Morisaki's older brother and his friend. They're kind of intense, but they're nice... I think. They did make me cry once, though."

At my words, the three of them twitched, the corners of their mouths moving. They looked at me with eyes that said, "You're joking, right?" I shrugged my shoulders in a gesture of denial.

Leaving the three, who had started trembling, to their own devices, I dealt with the next visitor while imagining what would happen if these three were subjected to one of the pranks I'd experienced.

They'd probably piss themselves. All three of them.

"My shift's over."

The hour had flown by, and before I knew it, my assigned time was up.

I handed over the reception duties to the classmate who had called out to me and reported the completion of my task to the teacher in charge of the post.

"Ahh! I'm so tired!"

"For real... Standing the whole time is rough."

"I wish we got an hourly wage~! Like 10,000 yen or something!"

Thinking that an hourly wage would indeed be nice, I walked down a hallway with less foot traffic, opposite the direction of my classroom. It was relatively quiet, as this corridor mainly housed rest areas, the Tea Ceremony Club's exhibit, and the Art Club's displayed works.

Tsujitani and the others seemed to have their own class duties, so we parted ways once we reached the staircase.

"Alright! Take care!"

"If I get some free time, I'll swing by your places~!"

"Hioki, you gotta come to the haunted house."

"No way."

I refused Ino's invitation, waved to the three of them, and headed for the classroom serving as the waiting room.

When I entered, it was deserted and quiet. I reached the desk where I'd left my belongings and quickly changed into my costume.

"(I don't wanna walk there alone in this outfit...)"

I found myself thinking that as I looked at the buttoned-up shirt. From here to Class 5's classroom wasn't far, but it wasn't exactly close either. I had to go up one flight of stairs, then pass through the hallway with Classes 1 through 4.

Guess I have no choice, I sighed and reached for my phone to put it in my pocket.

"……No, no."

My voice fell into the empty classroom.

I'd actually found myself thinking that if it was Watarai, maybe he'd come if I called him.

First of all, he was probably busy entertaining visitors to his class right now and wouldn't have time to check his phone. And my reason would be, "I'm embarrassed to walk alone in this outfit, so please come with me."

I've turned into such a spoiled brat, I thought to myself, but my eyes remained fixed on the phone's black screen.

A few seconds passed before I entered my passcode, unlocked the screen, and opened the chat room with Watarai.

『Reception's done. Heading over now.』

I typed and deleted the message several times before finally settling on this one and staring at it.

Before I left for reception, Watarai had said 'Come straight back,' but he hadn't said 'Contact me.' This was entirely me being spoiled.

With a slightly trembling hand, I pressed send. The shupon sound signaling the sent message echoed in the classroom.

If he didn't notice, that was fine. If he did, I'd be happy about that too.

As I was carefully storing the shirt I'd taken off into my enamel bag to avoid wrinkles, the lock screen at the edge of my vision lit up, announcing a new message.

『Wait 5 minutes』

「……」

I reread the short message several times.

Did this mean he was coming to get me? Stunned by this unexpected reply, I froze for a while, just staring at the screen.

I'd thought I might get a message like 'Waiting' or 'Hurry up,' but I never imagined he'd actually come to get me, just as I'd wished.

Bathed in a warm, sunny feeling, I started thinking of a reply.

("Roger" doesn't feel right... and just a stamp would be rude... Hmmm……)"

Even if a teacher found me, I'd probably get scolded, but I sat down at

a desk and groaned to myself.

If this reply was from anyone but Watarai, I would have just sent a brief response and been done with it, but when it's someone you like, you end up agonizing over every single word.

Either way, whether you've confessed your feelings or not, love always comes with its share of worries.

I eventually decided "Thank you" was the safest option and was typing it when I heard the sound of the door sliding open with a garatto. I turned around to see Watarai standing there, slightly out of breath.

Had five minutes already passed? I instinctively checked my watch, but only about two minutes had passed since he'd sent the message.

"Huh…… You said five minutes."

"Yeah, I sent that, but I wanted to come quickly."

"O-oh, I see."

Watarai caught his breath and then gave me a soft smile.

My chest felt like it was swelling up.

I knew it was probably just a coincidence, just me reading into things, but I was filled with a warm feeling for Watarai, who, even unconsciously, granted my wishes.

I looked up at Watarai standing before me, and a smile naturally formed on my face.

"I think I really like you, Watarai."

"Huh? Wha? Ah, me too... Wait, hold on. I wasn't mentally prepared, so..."

Watarai's face gradually turned scarlet as he took a step back. Seeing

the unusually flustered Watarai was so cute that I let out a laugh, stood up from the desk, and packed the clothes I'd half-finished putting away into my enamel bag.

I reached for my phone, which was still open to the chat room. When I switched to the home screen, the daylog icon caught my eye. Simultaneously, I remembered my conversation with Anna.

"Speaking of which, are you... exchanging DMs with Anna... I mean, Ikegetani?"

"Eh……"

It was just something I'd asked casually, but the color drained from Watarai's face, which had been red just moments before.

Silence flowed into the space between just the two of us.

The sound of the wall clock's second hand and the murmur of visitors from the hallway filled the classroom.

Watarai fidgeted, his eyes wandering, as if unsure how to explain.

I'd asked without much thought, but had I stepped on a landmine? Or was he misunderstanding, thinking I was angry?

Honestly, I didn't think there was anything guilty going on between Watarai and Anna. If he wanted to pursue a relationship with Anna, I couldn't see why he'd continue to show interest in me after the school trip, and I didn't think Watarai's confession was a joke.

"Uhm, I'm not angry. It was just a question... I-it's totally fine if it's hard to answer."

"No, I think if I don't say anything, it'll just feel unresolved for both of us... Let me say it."

Even so, Watarai seemed to be thinking about where to start and stayed silent for a while.

There was no need to rush him, so I looked out the window. Then, Watarai began to speak, his voice soft.

"The sports day... Tsumugi's sports day, when you came for me... During the scavenger hunt, you went and got the thing for me, right?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"Somehow, it turned into you introducing yourself then."

"Yeah, that's right."

I didn't understand what connection Tsumugi's sports day and Anna had, but it was true I'd announced my name and age to everyone present.

"When I heard you were 17, I thought, 'Your birthday's already passed, hasn't it...'"

"Y-yeah?"

It was true my birthday had already passed, but I still didn't see the connection to him and Anna being in contact.

Watarai peeked at me as I tilted my head but nodded, and then he continued.

"So, I thought about getting you a birthday present, but I didn't know what you liked. And I thought it'd be weird to ask you directly for a present."

"O-oh, I see…"

Honestly, I usually just get store-bought snacks from Tsujitani and the others, so that's totally fine. I don't know the standard for high school

boys' birthday gifts, but maybe it's different among Watarai and his friends.

More than that, I'd be happy with anything from Watarai.

"So, I was thinking, 'Is there anyone who knows Hioki well?' and then I remembered Ikegetani-san was following me, so I asked her for advice."

"I see."

So, he'd invited her to the culture festival through that conversation? Knowing Watarai, he probably also wanted to thank her properly for helping him.

In other words, Watarai consulted Anna, who knows things about me, to find out what I'd like for my birthday present, and I just made him reveal that plan…….

"……Sorry."

"Eh? Why? It's not something you need to apologize for, is it?"

Watarai shook his head vigorously.

The one who should really apologize is Anna for spilling the beans, but it was also my fault for pressing the issue.

Feeling a mix of guilt and happiness that created a confusing emotion, I turned my gaze back to Watarai.

"You might have already bought it, but you really don't need to spend much money. I'll be happy with anything from you."

"Yeah, but I'm doing this because I want to."

"Thank you. As long as it's not too big, I can accept it anytime..."

Am I a customer?

What's with "accept"? I'm the one receiving it, and there's not a hint of humility.

As I flusteredly tried to deny it, Watarai spoke up, looking awkward.

"Uhm... Since your birthday's already passed, I thought I might give it to you at Christmas, but would you prefer it at school?"

"……Sorry."

Am I an idiot?

I'd completely trampled all over Watarai's plans.

If possible, I wanted Tsujitani and the others to knock me on the head and give me amnesia. Ah, but if I got amnesia, I'd forget about Watarai too, so maybe not.

As I agonized and conflicted with myself, Watarai let out a loud laugh. "Ahahaha!"

"Surprises are surprisingly hard to pull off, huh? Sorry for showing you such an uncool side."

"I'm the one who's sorry. And, thank you."

"Yeah."

Watarai gave a gentle smile, then said, "Oh yeah," and pulled something out of his own bag.

It was a hair oil with package design featuring a circular petal logo. It was different from the one I saw on the school trip and gave off a slightly more expensive impression.

"Let me style your hair. You can just stay sitting there."

"Okay."

I nodded and checked the wall clock. It was already 10 minutes past when my shift was supposed to start, but it was probably fine to slack off a little.

That said, we couldn't linger too long, so he started fixing my hair simply with just a comb and the oil, without using a dryer or iron.

As I watched Watarai work skillfully, I said, "Ah, that's right."

"When's your birthday, Watarai?"

"Huh? Ah—... You promise you won't laugh?"

"It's your birthday; it's not like there's anything to laugh about."

"Yeah, but…"

Watarai hesitated for a moment, stopped his hands in my hair, and looked away, embarrassed.

I tilted my head at his reaction. It couldn't be... had he forgotten his own birthday? That would make me more worried than amused.

Watarai peeked at me, who was looking at him curiously, and muttered in a small voice.

"……February 14th."

"……O-oh~"

February 14th.

Valentine's Day.

Watarai might be a lady-killer chosen by the gods.

I couldn't help but laugh, feeling it was just so fitting. Watarai made a displeased face.

"See? You're laughing."

"Ahaha! Sorry. I just kinda get it now."

"That's why I didn't want to say it."

Though his voice and expression showed his displeasure, his hands remained gentle as he combed my hair. He gave my bangs a final slight adjustment, pulled his hands away with a flourish, and smiled with satisfaction as he clicked the hair oil cap shut.

"There, you look cute... I mean, handsome."

"? Thanks."

Wondering why he'd corrected himself, I stood up and put my phone in my back pocket.

As I was putting my watch on my wrist, Watarai sat down on the desk next to me.

"This is really late to ask, but... do you dislike being called 'cute,' Hioki?"

Hearing the slight hint of guilt in his tone, I looked at him. His eyebrows were downturned, making him look apologetic.

This really is a late thing to bring up, I thought, but I shook my head. The same scent as Watarai softly enveloped the area around my face.

"If you're asking if I particularly like being called cute, then not really, but... I'm happy it's coming from you, Watarai."

"I see. Thank you."

Watarai smiled, then stood up from the desk and started walking towards the door.

"My hands are kinda sticky. Is it okay if we stop by the sink?"

"Yeah, sure."

As I replied and moved closer to the door, Watarai started walking down the hallway in the opposite direction from our classroom.

There was a sink near Class 5's room too, but maybe he had somewhere else to stop by? Walking alongside him, I voiced my question.

"We're going this way?"

"Yeah, let's stay together a bit longer."

Saying that, Watarai smiled again.

Ah, so that's what it was. It seemed he wanted to extend our time alone, even if just a little.

I thought that kind of honest side of Watarai was cute.

When we reached Class 5's classroom, it was undeniably a great success, but the atmosphere was a sort of... quiet excitement.

Rather than people squealing like they would for an idol (though there was the occasional cheer), they were observing them more like

they were in an art gallery. Observing the handsome guys.

Nakazato and the others on hall duty seemed stressed by the stares and were wearing slightly stiff smiles. While Nakazato and Horita were managing, Morisaki was mostly expressionless, only smiling occasionally.

"...How bad is this stress, on a scale?"

"Hmm... About as bad as standing alone on the stage during the choir contest."

My cheek twitched at Watarai's reply.

They probably needed to incorporate some kind of healing element, or it would be tough to stay in this space until their shift ended. Maybe they should just take a break.

Just as I thought that, a savior appeared.

"Tsukasa-kun!... Ah! Asahi-kun!"

A cute voice echoed in the classroom.

I turned around to see Tsumugi-kun, who had been led in by a classmate on guide duty, running over.

Perfect timing.

"Your clothes are so cool~!"

"Thank you. Tsumugi-kun, could you do me a favor and call those three over too?"

I crouched down and pointed at Nakazato and the others.

Tsumugi-kun looked at me curiously, then nodded kokun and called

out.

"Haru-kun, Hayato-kun, Nao-kun! Hello~!"

"You've been requested."

As Tsumugi-kun called the three over while waving, I added on. Requested made it sound like a host club, but oh well.

"Tsumugi~! You came!"

"What'll you order?"

"Hey, let us sit with you."

The three of them quickly made their way to Tsumugi-kun's table. Nakazato rubbed his cheek against Tsumugi-kun's soft ones, Horita held out a menu, and Morisaki promptly took a seat.

The hall staff were now concentrated on this table, but their job was basically just taking orders, so I could handle the rest. I called out to Watarai too.

"Watarai, you should probably get some healing too..."

"My healing is Hioki, so I'm fine."

I laughed at Watarai's typical response, saying "I see," and looked down at Tsumugi-kun. My eyes met his mother's in the process. Of course, if Tsumugi-kun was here, his mother was too. Obviously.

I panicked, wondering if she'd heard everything, but Watarai's mother just smiled happily and turned her gaze back to Tsumugi-kun. That reaction made my heart flutter a little. I hadn't told my family yet, but had Watarai already told his? That he liked someone of the same sex.

"(Not the time to be thinking about this.)"

I shook my head as if to clear the haze from my mind and took a step to go attend to other guests.

"Ah, Asahi-kun, are you leaving?"

"Sorry. I'll be right back."

"Play with these exhausted big brothers for now."

I smiled at Tsumugi-kun, who looked lonely with his downturned eyebrows, and Watarai backed me up.

Tsumugi-kun nodded kokun, then looked around the classroom, pointed at a decoration, and started asking Nakazato and the others, "What's that?"

I moved on to clearing empty seats and attending to other guests. As I was moving around the classroom, the classmate on guide duty called out to me.

"Hey, Hioki. Is shared seating okay?"

"Shared seating? Is it that crowded?"

"Maybe because it's lunchtime? It's starting to get a bit packed."

The classmate, who had a calm way of speaking, pointed at her watch as she answered. It was past 12 PM, so it was indeed lunchtime. This was an unavoidable problem for classes serving food and drinks.

I thought it was already pretty crowded, but if it got worse, I wasn't sure we could handle it, so maybe we should consider shared seating.

When I nodded, the classmate nodded too.

"Okay, I'll go ask about shared seating then."

She said that and headed for the entrance door.

I looked around the classroom; the only place suitable for shared seating right now was probably where Tsumugi-kun and his mother were, just the two of them. Nakazato and the others were sitting with them, but if they left, another pair could probably sit there.

I was throwing used paper plates and plastic forks into a trash bag on the veranda when the same classmate called out to me again.

"Hioki, you've been requested."

"Eh, what... for?"

I peeked into the classroom and frowned.

Unexpectedly, the guests who had been directed to share Tsumugi-kun's table were my own family members.

How could that happen? I was thinking, when Minami, who had noticed me, beckoned me over. I let out a sigh and walked over with heavy steps.

"Hii-kun, don't make that face."

"Ahaha! That outfit looks good on you!"

"Don't you look handsome~!"

As soon as my two sisters and mom saw me, they started getting excited.

My sisters immediately held up their phones without permission and

started snapping pictures pasha pasha, so in my embarrassment, I forcefully shoved the menu at them.

"Stop taking pictures! More importantly, what do you want to eat?"

"Hmm~, what do you recommend?"

"The crepes are recommended."

Nakazato popped his face out from behind me and pointed to the top of the menu.

When my sisters saw Nakazato, they seemed to have a silent conversation via eye contact, then started speaking in a more subdued tone.

"Haven't we met you somewhere before?"

"Eh? No, I think this is the first time..."

"Hmm? I feel like I've seen you somewhere."

"He's a friend who was in my group during the school trip. I think I sent you photos."

I hurriedly cut in to explain to my sisters, who were confusing Nakazato.

My sisters went "Aah~!" in unison and nodded, then quickly checked their reflections on their phone screens and lightly adjusted their bangs. A rather belated action.

Since we were on the topic, I introduced each of them by name. When I introduced Morisaki, Wakaba looked away, seeming somewhat embarrassed.

"Hey there~, from that time..."

"Likewise."

Wakaba let out a dry laugh as she greeted him, and Morisaki responded with a nikko smile. It was hard to tell who was older.

Finally, when I mentioned Watarai's name, my sisters, and this time my mom too, all said "Aah~" in unison. I tilted my head at their different reaction to just Watarai's name, and my sisters started grinning happily.

"Watarai-kun, huh? A-kkun talks about him a lot at home."

"Lately, we hear his name more than Tsucchi-kun and the others."

"Eh……?"

I blinked and stared intently at my sisters.

Had I really been mentioning Watarai's name that much at home? It was true, I'd talked about how Watarai helped me during the school trip, and also about how he looked after me when I swallowed seawater... and the sports day too...

I had. Quite a lot, actually.

I turned my head like a broken robot, gigi, to look at Watarai standing beside me, and saw he was blushing and looking away.

Flustered by this unexpected exposure from my own family, I continued in a small voice.

"……And, actually, this is that Watarai-kun's mother and little brother."

With my brain on the verge of short-circuiting, I used my hand to indicate Watarai's mom and brother in front of me. My sisters paused for a moment, then stood up with a gata and bowed their heads peko.

"Wah! We're so sorry! We spoke your name so lightly!"

"It's nice to meet you! Thank you for always looking after our foolish younger brother!"

"Please continue to take care of him in the future~!"

Only my mom smiled cheerfully and gave a slow bow.

Watarai's mom also bowed her head pekori while stroking the back of Tsumugi-kun, who was clinging to her.

"The pleasure is ours. Our son also mentions Hioki-kun's name at least five times a day, so it's mutual! Just the other day, he――……"

"Ah, wa..! Stop, you don't need to say any more! Hurry up and eat, then go check out the other classes."

Watarai cut off his mom, who had started talking, and pointed to the crepes that had been brought over for Tsumugi-kun.

It was about to turn into a full-blown exposure session, and I was getting nervous. More than that, having our families meet like this was just crazy.

"So anyway, A-kkun! We'll have two crepes and three packs of assorted cookies, please~!"

"……Yeees."

I gave a listless reply and left the scene for a moment.

Honestly, I just wanted to go home.

I asked a classmate to handle the crepes, and as I was taking the cookie bags out of the stock box, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind. I turned around to see a classmate from the kitchen staff. I'm getting talked to a lot today, I thought as I replied.

"What's up?"

"Actually, we're running low on stock. Could you go get the spare cookies from the home economics room? I've got club duties."

"Sure, no problem."

"I thought about asking Nakazato or Horita, but..."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

It was better not to pull the handsome guys who were so effective at attracting customers.

I was just in the mood to get away anyway, so this was convenient.

"Ah! It's not that I think you're not a valuable asset, Hioki!"

"Eh? Ah... yeah."

That was one comment too many.

I forced a smile and first took the cookies I had to my sisters' and mom's table.

"Take-out is fine, right?"

"Yeah, thanks~! Oh, and Tsumugi-kun says he wants to take a picture with A-kkun."

I placed the cookies on the table and was about to take a step towards the home economics room when Wakaba grabbed my wrist. More importantly, when had she gotten so close to Tsumugi-kun?

I turned to Tsumugi-kun, and he was looking up at me shyly. I smoothly took my phone from my back pocket and handed it to Wakaba.

"Use mine to take it."

"Wait, let me take one with mine too."

"Me too."

Wakaba, who had taken my phone, pulled out her own. Minami next to her also poised her phone. A total of three phones were aimed at Tsumugi-kun. No, my mom was also rummaging in her bag, so maybe four.

I crouched down next to Tsumugi-kun, who looked a little intimidated, and smiled.

"Is it okay if we take a lot of pictures?"

"Yep! Um, is it okay if we take some with my mama's phone too?"

"Yeah, of course."

I smiled nikori, and Tsumugi-kun grinned shyly, "Ehehe." Feeling healed by his smile, I first turned my body towards Watarai's mom's phone.

"Okay, I'm taking it~! Tsumugi, look at this circle here!"

Watarai's mom said "Taking it~!" and pressed the shutter. After taking

a few shots, she lowered her phone.

"Thank you~! Oh, and one more request... Could you let me take a video too?"

"A v-video……?"

I'd had one taken by Watarai when I was on the merry-go-round during the school trip, but I really didn't know what to do in a video.

As I was wondering what to do, Watarai's mom laughed. "Ahaha!"

"You don't need to overthink it! Let's see~... Could you feed Tsumugi-kun some of the crepe?"

"Y-yes."

I nodded to Watarai's mom, then did as instructed: I took the plastic spoon on the paper plate and scooped up some of the cream and fruit from the top of the crepe. Holding my other hand underneath as a makeshift plate, I brought it to Tsumugi-kun's mouth.

"Here you go."

"Thank you!"

Tsumugi-kun opened his little mouth paka and stuffed the cream and fruit on the spoon into his mouth.

Maybe I was nervous from being filmed and took too much. The cream overflowed from the corners of his mouth onto his cheek.

I didn't have a tissue, and it was too much trouble to go get one, so I wiped it off with my finger and then licked my finger. A slightly too-sweet taste spread in my mouth.

"Is it yummy?"

"Yep! It's yummy!"

Tsumugi-kun smiled with a nipa, and my cheeks relaxed into a natural smile.

"Got some good footage... Thanks, Hioki-kun."

"Ah, no problem."

Remembering I was being filmed, my face grew a little hot. Trying to dispel the heat, I put the spoon down on the paper plate and fanned my face with my hand pata pata before turning towards my sisters, who were holding my phone.

"……What?"

"Nothing? It's just rare to see A-kkun so smitten."

"Hii-kun, the corners of your mouth were lifted so much it was kinda gross."

"……Shut up. Just take the picture already."

I glared at my smirking sisters, then made a smile and spoke to Tsumugi-kun.

"Is it okay if we take some with that phone now?"

"Yep... Asahi-kun, are you mad?"

"Nah, I'm not mad."

I smiled with my eyebrows lowered, and in the edge of my vision, I could see my sisters kuku stifling their laughter, covering their mouths.

Dammit, I'm not carrying their bags for a while.

Feeling a bit sulky inside, I let them take a few more photos, then stood up and took my phone back from Wakaba. Checking the pictures, my face was indeed relaxed to a kinda gross degree. But Tsumugi-kun was just so cute, I couldn't help it.

After checking the photos and putting my phone away, Tsumugi-kun stood up from his chair and gave his pants a quick tug.

"Asahi-kun, can I take pictures with everyone too?"

"Huh? Sure. Should I take them for you?"

"Nope. I want to take one with everyone!"

"Okay, I'll go call them over."

"Yep!"

Tsumugi-kun gave a spirited reply and went to get Watarai and the others.

I looked around the classroom, but there wasn't much space to line up all six of them, including Tsumugi-kun. The only place was probably on the teacher's platform.

I was looking for another possible spot when Tsumugi-kun returned, leading Watarai by the hand.

"Mama, take the picture~!"

"Okay, I'd love to, but we'd be in the way here."

Watarai's mom smiled apologetically with downturned eyebrows, then

Horita spoke up.

"Ah, how about the hallway in front of the classroom? The decorations are up there too."

"Ah, good idea! But will it be okay with the people?"

"It should be fine for a moment."

Nakazato and Morisaki agreed and headed for the door.

I didn't think it would be fine, but we had no other place, so it couldn't be helped. I started walking after them, and Watarai, still holding Tsumugi-kun's hand, fell into step beside me.

"Let's take a picture together later too."

"Ah, now that you mention it, we haven't done that."

I nodded in agreement, and Watarai smiled happily.

When we got into the hallway, we hurriedly lined up with Tsumugi-kun in the center. Standing made us look unbalanced, so we crouched, but that was also unbalanced.

"Tsumugitaka, pick Tsumugi up."

"Got it."

His mother, who was preparing the camera by the window, gave the instruction, and Watarai tried to lift Tsumugi-kun by putting his hands under his arms. But Tsumugi-kun squirmed and stretched both arms out towards me, who was standing next to him.

"I want Asahi-kun! No?"

"That's a no."

"Ehh……"

"It's totally fine. Come here, Tsumugi-kun."

I smiled at Watarai and then lifted Tsumugi-kun up.

It was the weight of a life, I guess, or maybe he was just heavier than I expected, because a grunt "Ugh" escaped me as I lifted him.

"Such an old man."

"Shut up."

I scowled at Morisaki, who had snorted, then turned my face towards the camera and smiled. Tsumugi-kun leaned his weight on me so he wouldn't fall and made a peace sign with one hand.

We were already blocking the hallway, so Watarai's mom quickly took the picture, lowered her phone, and bowed peko to the people whose path we'd blocked. We also said "Sorry～!" and bowed as we moved to the side of the hallway.

When I set Tsumugi-kun down, he looked at me with his big eyes, as if he'd seen something strange. Thinking maybe I was bad at holding kids, I crouched down and smiled at him.

"What's wrong?"

"Asahi-kun, you smell the same as Tsukasa-kun."

"Eh, y-yeah. I guess so today."

It was natural we smelled the same since we used the same hair oil,

but I was surprised Tsumugi-kun noticed.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Tsumugi-kun gave me a dazzling smile.

"It's 'cause you're together lots, so you became the same~!"

"Y-yeah, maybe."

I couldn't bring myself to argue with his innocent smile and laughed evasively, patting Tsumugi-kun's head as I stood up.

Then, I heard Minami and Wakaba's voices from behind.

"Hii-kun! We're heading home~!"

"If you get too tired to even pedal your bike, call us~!"

"Got it. Be careful."

I waved to my sisters and mom, and the three of them bowed peko to Watarai's mom and his friends before walking off towards the entrance. That's when I noticed the bag of cookies Minami was holding and let out an "Ah!" sound.

Watarai, who heard me, turned around and tilted his head.

"Something wrong?"

"I forgot I had an errand to run. I need to go to the home ec room real quick...! See you later, Tsumugi-kun!"

"Yep! Bye-bye!"

"Wait, I'll—"

As I hurried towards the staircase, Watarai also took a step to follow, but he was intercepted by a classmate.

"Hey! Our main attraction crew! Get back here!"

"More importantly, people think photo ops are okay now!"

"We've got a ton of requests, hurry up!"

My classmates fired off comments one after another as they ushered Watarai and the others back into the classroom.

Even as he was being pushed from behind, Watarai looked back at me. I mouthed "I'll be right back" and headed for the home economics room.

I ran up the stairs and entered the home ec room at the end of the hall. A food container was sitting on the desk designated for Class 5. I put both hands on it to take the whole thing, but then I stopped.

"This is gonna be awkward to carry whole... I should've brought a bag."

Since no one was there, I let out a solitary mutter, but my words didn't just fall in the empty room—they were picked up by someone who spoke from the doorway.

"Want me to carry it for you?"

"Eh?"

I looked up to see Ryoto-san leaning against the doorframe. Kokon-senpai was behind him. The two entered the room without hesitation, walked over to the desk where I was, and Ryoto-san sat on the edge of it.

"U-umm, unauthorized personnel aren't allowed in here... is that okay?"

"Huh? Well, I'm technically an alumnus of this place, so it's fine, right?"

"Eh, an alumnus?"

Ryoto-san nodded, "Yeah, yeah," and grinned.

I didn't know he was an alumnus. I looked at Kokon-senpai to see if he was one too, but he shook his head.

"I'm not an alumnus. And Ryoto isn't either."

"Ah! Don't tell him that!"

So it was a lie.

I felt a bit exasperated at myself for being fooled, but I tightened my grip on the food container and tried to lift it. Ryoto-san pressed down on my arm, stopping me. I lost my balance and the container landed on the desk with a *thud*. I was worried the cookies might have broken, but since it wasn't a big drop, they were probably fine. If they were crushed, I'd just make Ryoto-san buy them all. Thinking that, I slowly looked up, frowning deeply.

"……Wh-what is it?"

"So? Any progress since then?"

Ryoto-san peered into my face, looking delighted.

I had a feeling it was about that, but his approach was so blunt. I tried to look to Kokon-senpai for help, but he just shrugged apologetically.

It seemed I wouldn't be freed until I talked, so I relaxed the tension in my hand. Ryoto-san's hand also left my arm.

"So? What's the deal?"

"...There has been, uhm, progress."

The last time I'd met Ryoto-san was about two months ago. Which meant I'd spent two whole months after the almost-confession before giving an answer. And I'd only just confessed my own feelings very recently. I was starting to feel sorry for Watarai for taking so long. Ryoto-san let out a delighted "Hmm," at my evasive answer.

"So you gave him an answer."

"...Yes."

"A good one, right?"

"...Yes."

This is so incredibly embarrassing.

Unable to bear it, I looked down as I replied. Ryoto-san continued his questioning. *Please, just let me go already.*

"How far have you gotten?"

"H-how far...?"

"Don't tell me you've crossed the line?"

"Wha?! N-no way...!"

"What, not yet?... So, like, kissing at most?"

"Ki... I guess so."

Even if it was just on the cheek, that still counted as kissing, so I'd let it stand. More importantly, *your brother interrupted us at the perfect moment, you know.* Perhaps satisfied with my reaction, my ears burning red as I looked down, Ryoto-san let out a light breath and laughed. "Haha!"

"Besides, I told you to contact me 'if you started dating,' how stingy~!"

"Started da... eh……?"

I looked up at Ryoto-san's words.

What had he just said?

"If you started dating"?

He definitely said that.

I told Watarai I liked him, but did we actually start *dating*? I tried rewinding the recent events in my head to check, but……

"……We didn't."

"Eh?"

"We're... not dating, I guess."

"Haah?"

We weren't dating.

We'd just been exchanging "I like you"s up until now. Neither of us had said "Let's date."

We were just satisfied with confirming our feelings. Honestly, I think elementary school kids these days have more mature relationships than we do.

"……?"

At my reaction, both Ryoto-san and Kokon-senpai blinked, looking like pigeons who'd been shot with a peashooter. *Ah, maybe this is the first time I've managed to surprise them.* As I was having that pointless thought, Ryoto-san tilted his head, still wearing the same expression.

"Tsumugitaka confessed to you, right?"

"Probably...? Yes."

"What do you mean 'probably'?"

"Uhm... he did say he likes me. But he didn't say 'let's date.'"

"I see... And you kissed, right?"

"...Yes."

"Didn't he say anything before that?"

"...I said I like him."

"And that's it?"

"That's... it."

Ryoto-san looked at Kokon-senpai, and the two of them burst out laughing at once.

"Pfft... Haha! What is that, what's going on!"

"Innocent, or maybe pure-hearted... It's rather charming."

Kokon-senpai also laughed, a *kuku* sound in his throat, and covered his mouth. To adults, our romance might seem roundabout and childish, but unfortunately, this is my absolute limit when I'm being serious.

"Glad to see Tsumugitaka's still a proper kid too... kuku... Forgetting to officially get together because he's so happy, he's got a cute side to him, huh?"

"Maybe he'll skip dating and go straight to proposing."

"Ah……"

"「Eh」"

It was a joke, but it *had* happened.

I inadvertently reacted, and Ryoto-san and Kokon-senpai looked at each other again and burst into roaring laughter.

"Ahaha! My stomach hurts! What's up with your romantic order?!"

After laughing his fill, Ryoto-san started talking, his shoulders still shaking.

"Pfft... Well, it's fine, isn't it? It's the first time for both of you, with another guy... kuku... There's a lot you don't know."

"But it's better to say it, right?"

"Eh? Ah, you mean 'let's date'?"

"Yes."

When I nodded, Ryoto-san paused for a beat, then "Hmm," and looked up at the ceiling diagonally.

Huh? I thought he'd tell me to just say it quickly, but maybe not?

"Well, if you both like each other, I think it's fine."

"Yes."

"It's just, you know, it might not be as fun if it becomes an obligation."

"Eh?"

His expression still smiling, Ryoto-san lowered his eyelids and muttered with a hint of loneliness in his voice. He gently raised his gaze, looked at my face, and reformed his smile.

"Did you tell Tsumugitaka you liked him because you felt you had to?"

"Eh, no, it was kind of natural?... More like, I got confused and it just slipped out."

"Sounds like that's fine then? There'll be a time when you can say it naturally. Don't know if it'll come from you or from Tsumugitaka, though."

He stood up from the desk he was sitting on and started to reach out to ruffle my hair, but his hand didn't land on my head, instead giving

my shoulder a gentle *pon* tap.

"Besides, this period right now, with no strings attached, might be the most fun."

"I-is that so."

I gave a small nod, glanced at the hand on my shoulder, and looked back at Ryoto-san. The hand, which I thought would leave immediately, stayed put. Ryoto-san kept his hand on my shoulder and stared intently at me. Wondering what was up, I tilted my head. Suddenly, he pulled me closer by the shoulder, closing the distance between us. Ryoto-san sniffed *sun* near my ear, then pulled his hand away abruptly. Not understanding the meaning, I instinctively stepped back and covered my ear.

"Wh-what was that..."

"Nah, sorry, sorry. By the way, are you wearing perfume?"

"No? I have hair oil on, though."

"Heh~, fancy."

"Watarai styled it for me."

"Hmm."

Ryoto-san's face broke into a happy smile when he heard my words. I frowned, unable to read his actions. Ryoto-san took out his phone and slid his finger across the screen with practiced ease.

"Lately, you know, 'meaningful scents' seem to be popular."

"Meaningful scents?"

"Scents that have a specific meaning."

Ryoto-san didn't stop scrolling as he peeked at me and smirked. He was making a show of searching, but I had a feeling he'd already found what he was looking for.

"Sweet, but... kind of like a rose? Like if you get too close, the thorns might prick you."

"Ha...?"

"Ah, this is it, this one."

Ryoto-san turned the screen towards me, looking satisfied. Peering at the screen, I saw a list from a website with stylish graphics. It featured various fragrance-related products, not just hair oil, but perfumes, aroma oils, bath salts, etc.

"Is the hair oil Tsumugitaka was using from this brand?"

"Ah, yes. It is."

I checked the logo of circular petals he pointed to on the screen and nodded. Ryoto-san let out a loud laugh. "Haha!"

"It's a bit pricey for a high schooler to buy, but well, it's a kind of warning shot, isn't it?"

"Warning shot?"

"Yeah, I think the one Tsumugitaka is using is probably the 'gift' version."

"Eh, why?"

"Why, well..."

Ryoto-san shrugged and pointed at the screen again.

I looked at the screen, which had switched to the gift collection page. Detailed descriptions were written for each item.

I found the hair oil package Watarai had and tried to read the description. However, maybe it was a feature of this site, it was full of difficult kanji and unique phrasing, so I couldn't really understand it.

As I groaned in front of the screen, Ryoto-san made a *kuku* sound in his throat and tapped my chest with his index finger *ton*.

"They've written a bunch of complicated stuff, but basically it means, 'This one is mine, so don't get any ideas.'"

"Eh,…… ah, is that so."

I blinked several times, surprised that such a meaning was embedded. I looked back at the screen to check the price. It wasn't quite a 10,000 yen bill, but it was close enough that it'd be hard to explain as a coincidental purchase.

"So? Doesn't it feel heavy? He'll probably keep doing stuff like this with a straight face from now on."

"Heavy?... It's nothing, really."

"Hmm, if you're too tolerant, you might get locked up one day, you know?"

Ryoto-san closed his phone, put it in his pocket, and laughed as if joking. I laughed too at his exaggerated example. He probably wouldn't go *that* far... probably.

"Watarai wouldn't do anything I dislike... Probably."

"Ooh, that's some serious trust. And you haven't even known each other that long."

Now that he mentioned it, that was true.

There was no way I could know everything about Watarai in less than a year. But if I didn't know, I could just learn. I could take it in little by little and face it together. I didn't respond to Watarai's feelings with the intention of getting scared off by something like this.

I let out another small laugh, as if affirming my thoughts, and this time Kokon-senpai spoke up.

"Sorry to interrupt your fun, but don't you need to take that soon?"

"Eh?…… Ah."

I looked down at the food container Kokon-senpai pointed to. Then, sliding my eyes to look at my watch, I saw that more than 10 minutes... no, even longer, had passed since I left the classroom. My classmates hadn't come running, so we probably hadn't sold out yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"...I wish you'd told me sooner."

"My apologies."

Kokon-senpai offered a short apology, then strode over and lifted the food container effortlessly with one hand.

I tried to refuse, since I couldn't really have a visitor help, but Ryoto-san cut off my attempt to speak.

"It's fine, consider it atonement."

"You should say that *after* you've carried it, Ryoto-san."

"Haha! Sorry 'bout that~"

Following Kokon-senpai, who had already started walking, Ryoto-san also headed for the door.

I let out a sigh and followed the two of them.

When we reached the classroom, the quiet excitement had turned into a noisy one. Or rather, it felt like Watarai and the others were being swarmed by female students from other schools asking for commemorative photos. On the blackboard, probably written by Horita, were the words 'One photo per person!' scrawled in strangely skilled calligraphy.

"Thank you. Uhm... would you like to stop by? It's crowded, though."

"Nah, we've seen all your faces, and we've got work now, so we're heading out."

"Contact us anytime if anything comes up."

"Ah, yes. Take care."

I took the food container from Kokon-senpai, saw them off, then wove through the crowd to get behind the curtain and put out the additional cookies. At the same time, I heard the voice of my classmate, Kinoshita, from behind.

"Hey, Hioki, thanks! Perfect timing!"

"Sorry I'm late."

"Not at all! The main attractions bought us some time."

Saying that, Kinoshita glanced into the classroom, quickly took a few of the newly added cookie bags, and went back.

I tried to return to work, stepping out from behind the curtain, but the person standing right in front of me pushed me back in.

"You're finally back."

"Ah, sorr... Hey, wait, this is a classroom."

"Yeah, I know."

Contrary to his words, Watarai hugged me tightly and buried his face in my neck. I heard the sound of him taking a deep breath, reminiscent of someone sniffing a cat, and my body shivered *buru*.

There was a high chance someone could see us, so I tried to squirm and peel Watarai off, but when I moved my head, the scent of his hair oil wafted over. Simultaneously, the content Ryoto-san had told me about earlier flashed through my mind.

"Ah……"

Suddenly, heat rushed throughout my entire body.

Perhaps wondering why I'd suddenly frozen, Watarai reluctantly pulled away from me, peering at my face. His expression twisted into one of panic when he saw my flustered look. "Sorry... Did you dislike it?"

"N-no, it's not that I disliked it, it's just... this is a classroom... L-let's just get back to work for now."

"...Yeah."

Watarai lowered his eyebrows, looking sad, and disappeared from behind the curtain. *I'm really sorry. If we were alone, I wouldn't have pushed you away.* I took a breath to calm my still pounding heart, then also stepped out from behind the curtain.

Since Watarai and the others were handling photo requests, I took care of taking orders and clearing tables.

Occasionally, I'd hear things from the girls like, 'I follow you on daylog!' or 'If it's okay, could you tell me your other SNS handles?' or 'Please come to our culture festival too!'. While it made me feel a bit unsettled, I tried to empty my mind and focus on work, when someone tapped *ton ton* on my shoulder.

"Mister~, take a picture with me too, please~!"

"That'll be 500 yen per photo~"

"Whoa, that's harsh! That's more expensive than a print club!"

Anna, who was standing behind them, puffed out her cheeks. Her friend was with her too. Her friend observed me from head to toe,

then gave a soft smile.

"It suits you."

"Ah, thank you."

She had a refined voice that sounded like she came from a good family. I gave a slight, polite bow. Anna held up her phone and tugged on my shirt.

"Asahi, take a pict... Wait, can you even take one?"

"I can take one."

I took the phone from Anna, stretched out my arm, and framed the three of them in the screen. I felt like I'd gotten a bit more used to taking pictures after being around Watarai and the others.

Muttering "Taking it," I pressed the button on the phone. The screen flashed for a moment, and the photo saved in the bottom right corner.

"Somehow... you seem used to it?"

"Well, I'm a high schooler too."

"Ugh, that's... kind of annoying."

Anna checked the photo, put her phone away, then turned a pleading gaze on me. Thinking it might be a troublesome request, I quickly averted my eyes.

"Hey, I want to apologize to Watarai-kun, can you call him over for me?"

"Call him yourself."

"I can't handle the glares from his fanclub."

"I don't like it either."

"Then I'll go call him over."

"「Eh？」"

At the unexpected person's statement, Anna and I stared wide-eyed at the girl. She smiled *nikori*, then cut through the group of other school's female students who were still loitering and walked over to Watarai.

"Excuse me~! Could you please move aside~?"

Her refined voice had vanished somewhere, replaced by a nasal, high-pitched tone. I was dumbfounded by her completely different attitude. Watarai was also frozen with a surprised expression. The girls from other schools shot her looks that said, "What's her problem?", but unflinching under their gaze, she spoke.

"I just can't stand the thought of someone taking my boyfriend~!"

Saying that, she latched onto Watarai's arm and started pulling him away with a *gui*. She cut through the crowd and walked back to us. Anna's friend put on her refined smile again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Th-thanks..."

"Misaki-chan, you're amazing..."

As I thanked her, Anna muttered under her breath.

The girl, called Misaki, switched her atmosphere again, pulled Watarai's arm closer to herself, and started talking.

"But you're so super handsome~, won't you really be my boyfriend?"

She looked up at him with sparkling, glittering eyes.

Watarai shook his head left and right, then narrowed his eyes slightly, forming a smile only with his mouth. He gently untangled Misaki-san's hands from his arm.

"Please stop that, even as a joke."

"Fufu, I'm sorry.... You already have someone, don't you?"

Misaki-san pulled her hands away *pa* and wrapped herself in her refined demeanor once more, smiling *nikori*.

As I stared blankly at the scene, Anna tugged on my sleeve from beside me.

"H-how did she know?"

"Even if you ask me..."

The only thing that came to mind was the hair oil, but apparently that was the gift version, and I didn't know what it meant if he used it on himself. I was thinking that Ryoto-san might know, when *bachi*, my eyes met Watarai's. He tilted his head as if prompting me for the reason I'd called him over, so I flusteredly pushed Anna's back.

"Sorry for calling you over so suddenly, Ann... Ikegetani has something she wants to say to you, Watarai."

"Eh! Ah, um, long time no see. Uhm, actually, about the DM thing, I wanted to apologize..."

Since I'd pushed her out without any warning, Anna started speaking incoherently. Watarai muttered "Ah," glanced at me, then returned his gaze to Anna.

"About that, it's totally fine. I'm sorry for making you worry unnecessarily. Thank you for giving me advice."

"No! I'm really sorry. Uhm, p-please continue to take care of Asahi from now on...?"

"Ahaha! Of course."

When Anna bowed *peko*, Watarai laughed cheerfully in reply. *More importantly, I feel like that's not really a line for Anna to say.*

Now that that was settled, I checked my watch. We were already way past our shift time. Watarai and the others had been entertaining guests since I was at reception, so they'd been at it for a solid two hours straight. Thinking it was about time to wrap up, I called out to Anna and the others.

"Well, we're about to finish up, so..."

"Okay, thanks! See you, Watarai-kun!"

"Yeah."

Watching Anna and Watarai talk so casually, as if they'd gotten closer without me noticing, I heard Misaki-san's voice from next to me.

"Uhm, Asahi-kun, are you on daylog?"

"Eh? Ah, well, sort of...—"

"Sorry, we have another job after this."

Watarai cut off my reply, stepping between us. He put on a superficial smile, grabbed my wrist, and started walking.

I turned back and bowed slightly. Misaki-san also smiled and bowed back. Anna sure had friends with strong personalities.

I called out to Nakazato and the others too, and we quickly returned to the vacant classroom. Everyone had fatigue written all over their faces; they were in no state to enjoy the culture festival.

Swinging the door open forcefully, we practically tumbled into the classroom.

"I'm gonna die... I'm so tired I could die."

"...I don't even have the energy to change."

"I wanna go home..."

Nakazato and the others leaned back in their chairs with their buttons partly undone, or slumped over desks, looking like they were about to turn to dust and disappear. Watching them out of the corner of my eye, I took the class T-shirt and uniform from my enamel bag and started on the buttons, but *pashi*, someone grabbed my wrist from the side. "Wait, we still haven't taken a picture together."

Saying that, Watarai moved his hand from my wrist to my shoulder, pulled me close, and held up his phone.

I smiled for the image reflected on the screen. The screen flashed, and the photo saved. Maybe it was from getting used to it, but lately the "I'm taking it" warning seemed to have disappeared.

Confirming that Watarai, now sitting on a desk, was wearing a satisfied smile, I started moving my hands again to undo the buttons I'd stopped on.

"By the way, are we going somewhere after we change?"

"We've got about two hours left."

"Wait, haven't we not eaten anything?"

"Wanna check out the courtyard? I think there were a bunch of things there."

I tuned out the four-way conversation and continued changing, but I

couldn't get the button on my cuff undone. As I struggled with it, Watarai, still talking, reached over with one hand and undid it for me with a *pichi*.

"Thanks."

"Mhm."

Watarai smiled *nikko*, put his phone on the table, and started changing too. Nakazato and the others finally started moving and began changing as well.

"Speaking of which, you know those people we took photos with today? They were all using different apps, so I bet our faces look different in all of them."

"Ah~, I get that. I wish they'd stop."

"The ones with heavy filters are the worst."

"And the normal camera is rough too."

I don't get it at all.

I understand the whole 'can you make it look good' thing with print clubs, but regular cameras must be different somehow. More importantly, the photos he took of me during the school trip all looked cool, so it should be fine.

Now dressed in the mismatched outfit of class T-shirt and uniform pants, I leaned against the window frame to wait for Watarai and the others to finish changing. In the meantime, I searched for the site Ryoto-san had shown me.

"(As expected, there's nothing about using the gift version on yourself...)"

I scrolled through the screen, looking around, when a 'Frequently Asked Questions' link button appeared.

Tapping it brought up company information like store locations and access details, and sometimes answers to simple questions like how long the scent lasts. I was reading through them one by one when the question I was looking for suddenly appeared.

1. If I give the gift version as a present and also use it myself as a matching item, does the

meaning of the effect still apply?

A. Basically, only the target changes; the inherent meaning of the scent remains the same. For example□□……

Reading the example answer, I started to understand vaguely. So, if Watarai gives it to me, it means 'You are mine,' and if Watarai uses it himself, it signifies 'I belong to someone.'

Was that what Misaki-san had picked up on when she said he was taken? *That's kind of impressive in its own way.*

I was scrolling through the screen again when Watarai, who had finished changing, peeked over from beside me.

"What are you looking at?"

"Wah?! Ah……."

My phone fell at Watarai's feet with a dull thud.

It was my fault for looking it up while he was right next to me, but the timing was just too bad.

Seeing my obvious fluster out of the corner of his eye, Watarai picked up the phone. He must have seen the displayed screen, because his expression clouded for a moment.

"Ah, that's..."

"Be careful, if your phone breaks it's dangerous."

"Eh? Ah, thanks."

I thought he might say something about it, but Watarai just smiled and handed the phone back to me.

I took it and looked at the screen; it didn't seem cracked. But he definitely saw the website, so he must have thought *something. Well, if Watarai doesn't mind, it's fine.* I pushed myself off the window frame, put my phone in my pocket, and *span*, the hallway-side window slid open.

"Hioki! I need a lifelong favor!"

Tsujitani yelled loudly, putting his hands together in front of his face and bowing. I had a bad feeling, so I shook my head preemptively.

Tsujitani looked at me with a face on the verge of tears.

"Please, think of it as saving your best friend...!"

"I said no."

"Come on, it's fine. Let's at least hear him out."

Morisaki cut into the conversation between Tsujitani and me. Maybe because he wasn't directly involved, he was smiling with anticipation. *The Morisaki brothers really do love sticking their noses into other people's business.* Prompted by Morisaki, Tsujitani's face lit up *pa* and he started talking.

"To get straight to the point, Hioki, I want you to cross-dress."

"No. I refuse."

"Please! A lifelong... no, a *two*-lifetimes favor!"

Don't rope in my next life too.

I shook my head again without a moment's thought.

But Tsujitani didn't give up and pressed on.

"I'm begging you~!"

"Wait, why does it have to be Hioki?"

Horita tilted his head, and I nodded in agreement.

I didn't understand why it had to be me.

I looked at Tsujitani. He started talking, his eyebrows still downturned.

"There's a cross-dressing contest later, right? Well, the guy from our class who was supposed to enter, he ate a frankfurter that fell on the floor and got a stomach ache..."

Wait a second. Time out.

The lead-in was so impactful that nothing was processing. At least I understood that guy was an idiot.

I looked at Watarai and the others; all four of them were stifling their

laughter. The fact that Tsujitani was being completely serious made it even worse. But they seemed to be holding back incredibly hard, probably thinking the conversation wouldn't progress if they laughed.

"And so, that guy's in the nurse's office now, so we have no one to enter the contest... That's why, Hioki."

"No, why me? Solve it within your class."

It doesn't make sense.

Why did *I* have to substitute for someone whose stomach couldn't handle the 3-second rule? And Tsujitani is in Class 1. I'm in Class 5.

It *really* didn't make sense.

"That still lacks persuasiveness, though."

Watarai spoke up, as if throwing me a lifeline.

As expected. Watarai really is the best.

Tsujitani's eyebrows curved into an even deeper ' ⁄\' shape as he spoke.

"Well, there's no one in our class who's the same height as the Frankfurter. And we stupidly had the costume custom-made..."

Let's put aside the fact he just casually called his friend 'the Frankfurter'... Is that even possible?

I'm 174 cm, which seems like a height at least one person in a class would have. *What's going on with Class 1?*

There were so many points I wanted to question, but something Tsujitani said made me go *ah!*

"Then wouldn't Nakazato work instead of me?"

"Ha?!"

Nakazato and I are about the same height.

Maybe I'm taller by a millimeter... We might both still be growing, so it's not exact. The one who reacted most strongly to my suggestion was, of course, Nakazato. He shook his head vigorously in denial.

"No way! Absolutely not!"

"Why? You have better features than me and you're cute. You could win."

"You're the cute one! You're the type that would transform if you cross-dressed!"

"You're cute on a genetic level!"

"You're cute on a cellular level!"

"Now, now, why not decide by rock-paper-scissors?"

"「Don't you start!」"

For some reason, Tsujitani, the one who was asking the favor, tried to mediate, and both Nakazato and I retorted in unison.

Then Nakazato, as if remembering something, pointed his finger sharply at me.

"I have an 'IOU' with you, don't I, Hioki?"

"Ha? There's no such……"

"There was."

That's right. During the school trip, when I was late because I was talking to Anna, he backed up my story. That was the 'IOU'. I should have just played dumb, but because I remembered, a groan stuck in my throat.

That's sneaky. Why don't I have any IOUs to use?

Seeing me speechless, Tsujitani probably took it as consent, as a relieved smile spread across his face.

"Thanks, Hioki! I owe you one!"

"Hey, I haven't agreed ye—"

"The participants get an all-you-can-eat ticket for that popular yakiniku place near the station, you know."

"Tha……"

I was about to say, "There's no way I'd agree to that," but it was just too tempting, and I could only manage the first syllable. *The food isn't at fault here.* But when weighed against cross-dressing, the scales still tipped towards 'no'. Just as I was about to shake my head again, Tsujitani added more.

"And you get a 5,000 yen Amazon card too! Hioki, you were saying the other day you wanted to buy something for your cat, right?"

"That……"

My resolve wavered even more at that.

It's just that I want a cat hammock, but I'd mentioned in the club that the one I liked was a bit pricey. I never thought it would come back to bite me like this. If you asked me if I could cross-dress for yakiniku and my cat... it was a tough call.

"Please, Hioki~! A favor for three lifetimes! You just have to stand on the stage!"

"……"

"Hey, don't we kinda not have time?"

As I was agonizing over Tsujitani's plea, Morisaki glanced at his watch. I didn't know what time the cross-dressing contest started, but the festival itself ended at 4 PM, so it was probably around 3 PM. That meant we had less than an hour. I glanced at Tsujitani; he was peeking at me with teary eyes. *I'm the one who wants to cry*, I thought, let out a sigh, and gave a small nod.

"……Fine."

"Thank you! Hioki! I love you! I really love you! Hey, Hioki said yes!"

"Eh???"

As Tsujitani called out towards the hallway, several girls came into the classroom. *Wait, were they there the whole time?*

"Thank you! Hioki! Here, put this on right away!"

"We'll do your makeup too, so please cooperate!"

"You can keep your class T-shirt on!"

The girls chattered excitedly and started spreading out makeup tools on a desk. I stood there frozen, holding the costume, not quite grasping the situation. *Wait, I haven't even checked the costume.* I unfolded it to see it was something similar to the maid outfits the girls in our class had been wearing. At least it seemed like my legs wouldn't be exposed, which was a relief.

"Hey, I need to change, so can you all step out?"

"Eh? You don't need to take off your pants, just roll up the hem. And unzip the back... Here, step into it."

A circle was drawn on the floor with the costume, and I was made to stand inside it. The costume was lifted up, and I put it on like I was wearing a mascot suit. Having never worn a skirt before, my lower half felt insecure.

I got it on, but I couldn't zip up the back. Glancing behind me, I saw my friends just watching, so I called out to Watarai.

"Watarai, zip me up."

"Eh? Ah... yeah."

Watarai stood up from the desk he was sitting on, stood behind me, and slowly pulled up the zipper.

He spoke to me in a low voice so the girls busy preparing wouldn't hear.

"……Sorry for making you show something weird."

"No... Sorry on my part. Actually, I'm kind of looking forward to it."

"Eh……"

Honestly, I was prepared for him to be put off, but surprisingly, Watarai looked at me with curious eyes. *My loved one is... looking forward to me cross-dressing? That's a bit unusual.* Since it seemed I didn't have to worry about him being disgusted, I felt a bit relieved and let out a breath.

Ah, but if the final result is a disaster, he'll definitely be weirded out. Sorry, I apologized in my heart in advance, when a female student called out.

"Sit here~! Don't worry, I studied makeup really hard for this day."

"Is that so."

At this point, I was beyond caring. I gave a noncommittal reply, sat in the chair, and closed my eyes.

Please, please don't let this be a disaster.

"Done~! My best work ever~!"

"Whoa! You look cute!"

"Eh?! Way cuter than the Frankfurter!"

The girls clapped *pachi pachi* when they saw me still sitting in the chair. Since I hadn't looked in a mirror, I didn't know if this was their real opinion or just flattery. More importantly, my head felt heavy with the wig.

The guys who had been in the back seemed curious too, making *gata gata* sounds with the desks and chairs as they came around to the front.

Too embarrassed, I kept my face up but averted my eyes.

"Eh, you look cute."

"Looks like a normal girl."

"Kinda reminds me of your sister a bit."

"Aside from your build, you're cute."

Nakazato, Horita, Morisaki, and even Tsujitani voiced their praise. Their expressions were so ambiguous I felt uneasy, unsure if they were serious or joking. I looked at Watarai; he was squinting as if looking at something dazzling. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad either.

Wanting to see for myself, I called out to a female student.

"Can I have a mirror?"

"Ehh~, that'd ruin the fun. Use the audience's reaction to imagine it~!"

One of the girls said that and put her makeup pouch and mirror away too. *That's a pretty cruel thing to say. What if I get booed?*

"Alright! Hioki! Do your best for Class 1!"

"We're counting on you~!"

"Bye-bye!"

The girls hurriedly left the classroom, probably having other duties. The classroom fell silent *shin...*, leaving five guys and me, cross-dressed. All the tension drained out of me, and I slumped forward onto a nearby desk. Suddenly, my collar was pulled *gui*. "Guh!" I choked out as my neck constricted and turned around to see Morisaki peering at me, phone in hand.

"Stop slumping, you'll ruin the makeup."

"Stop yanking on me suddenly."

"More importantly, let me take a picture."

Listen to me, will you?

Feeling exasperated, I made a peace sign with a straight face. Morisaki poised his phone. Taking that as their cue, Nakazato, Horita, and Tsujitani also pointed their phones at me. Tsujitani told me, "Close your legs," but I ignored him. Only Watarai didn't have his phone out; he was leaning against the wall, just staring at me. *Was he really put off after all?* I started to worry, but it was too late now. I averted my eyes from Watarai, and Tsujitani pulled on my arm.

"We gotta go soon! Let's head to the gym!"

"Haah... I really have to go, huh?"

"Of course! Backing out now would be unmanly!"

"Seriously, just don't say anything else."

After all that 'lifelong favor' and making a tearful face.

As Tsujitani pulled me by the arm down the hallway, people kept looking at me, and I was dying of embarrassment, so I desperately tried to recall a sad movie I'd seen recently.

'Next up, let's welcome the second-years!'

At the voice of the student from the broadcasting club acting as MC, applause erupted in the gymnasium. It seemed humans preferred

bizarre events over dances or plays; the gym was packed with students and general visitors alike.

As the Class 1 representative, I had to go out. At this point, I just had to resign myself. I didn't even try to walk in a feminine way, just walked normally to the indicated spot. My eyes were probably dead.

Once everyone was lined up, the MC student pointed the mic at me. Tsujitani had said I just had to stand there, but I guess I had to say something.

"For Class 1, we have 'Saa-chan'! Who will you take the participation prize, the all-you-can-eat yakiniku ticket, with~?"

'Saa-chan' was the name Tsujitani had arbitrarily given me. Since my sisters call me 'A-kkun' and 'Hii-kun', he apparently took the 'sa' from 'Asahi' to make 'Saa-chan'. The nameplate attached to my waist also had 'Saa-chan' written on it in cute handwriting.

From various places, I could hear unknown guys yelling things like, "Saa-chan, you're cute~!" or "Saa-chan, look over here!" *I'll just ignore these.*

"Ah... My friends, I guess."

"Your friends! And where might your friends be?"

How should I know?

In the gym, only the stage was lit, so the audience seats were dim. *There's no way I could know*, I thought, but then I saw someone waving what looked like a penlight in a corner and another spot flickering with what was probably the scrolling text function on a phone, so I pointed on a hunch.

"Around there, I think."

When I pointed, a student on lighting duty in the gallery pointed a light in that direction. The spotlight revealed Tsujitani, Ino, and Mizunase—my club mates—looking thrilled to be in the light, and next to them, Watarai, Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki desperately trying to hide their faces.

Simultaneously, a shriek that surpassed a regular 'Kyaa!'—more of a 'Gyaa!'— echoed *biribiri* through the gym.

I thought, *How good is their eyesight?* but the cause of the scream was the screen at the back. There must have been a camera crew somewhere, because the figures of Watarai and the others, who were trying so hard to hide their faces, were displayed perfectly on it.

"Ooh! It's the second-year princes and their friends!"

"Huh? S-second-year princes?"

I didn't really get it, but it seemed Watarai and the others were called that by people around. My mutter wasn't picked up, and the MC moved on to interview the Class 2 student. *Come to think of it, who's representing Class 5?* I took a slight step back to check and saw a student from the judo club, despite the 'second-year princes' being available. They'd probably refused, so Class 5 had gone for a gag entry. The guy himself was totally into it. After confirming, I straightened my posture and looked towards the area below the stage.

One thing I noticed during the interviews was that the crowd was just so loud. They were probably mostly third-years. The guys were shouting the entrants' names and making a racket, while the girls were holding up uchiwa fans that they'd probably made just for this. I moved my head around, trying to read the text on the fans or look over the audience, and my hair almost got in my mouth, so I tucked it behind my ear. Just that alone elicited an "Ooh!" and cheers.

Maybe doing nothing is the right answer. After that, I just stood there like a stick.

"And now, for a 10-second appeal time!"

The MC's voice suddenly reached my ears.

It was probably the same procedure as for the first-years, but I'd been too busy trying to recall a sad movie, so I hadn't been listening.

The MC came back to me and took a piece of paper from his pocket. Wondering what it was, I tilted my head. The MC read the contents of the paper aloud.

"'It seems Saa-chan from Class 1 will perform the poses she is instructed to do!'"

Saying that, the MC held up the paper to the camera.

I turned around to check the screen and saw it was unmistakably

written in Tsujitani's messy handwriting.

It was better than having prepared nothing, but I wondered who would be giving the instructions. Just then, a barrage of shouts came from the audience seats.

"Do a finger heart~!"

"Do a 'moe moe kyun'~!"

"Give us a blown kiss!"

"Please wink~!"

"Marry me~!"

There were too many to make out clearly, but a girl sitting in the front row was making a heart shape with her hands as a reference, so I followed her lead and tried making a few. I made a typical heart, put my hands on my cheeks, and waited for the 10 seconds to pass. Ten seconds in a situation like this felt long, more like ten minutes. I just struck as many poses as I could manage before the MC started speaking again.

"Okay, thank you very much~! That was full of Saa-chan's charm! Now, next, for Class 2's□□……"

My turn was over. I let out a sigh of relief.

I tuned out the cheers for the Class 2 student's act, turned my back to the audience, and looked at the screen behind me.

Making an appeal in 10 seconds was pretty tough; it was almost like a single gag performance. Our class did tile breaking, which had nothing to do with cross-dressing, which ironically made it more likable. Given my appearance, I didn't think I stood a chance of winning.

When the Class 7 student finished their appeal, I turned my body back towards the audience.

'That's all for our second-year entrants! Please wait while the judging results are finalized~! Everyone, please see them off with a round of applause~!'

Applause erupted at the MC's words, and the entrants filed off to the side of the stage. We had to wait here until the third-years were done,

but with little time left until 4 PM, it probably wouldn't take long.

I went down to the side of the stage and sat on a pipe. My classmate from the judo club, Koga, sat down next to me.

"Why are you the Class 1 rep, Hioki?"

"Well, the Frankfurter kinda..."

"Huh? Frankfurter?"

"Never mind. Apparently, the guy who was supposed to enter got sick, and the costume just happens to be my size."

"Heh~ So if you win, does that mean our class wins?"

"Who knows? But I'm not gonna win, so either way, Class 1 probably won't get anything."

"Hmm."

Koga gave that reply and then stared at my outfit, looking me up and down. After a thorough inspection, he suddenly reached out and flipped up my skirt *gaba*.

"What's this, you're wearing pants?"

"Of course I am. Are you... not wearing any?"

"Can't be helped with this length, huh."

Saying that, Koga flipped up his own skirt *pera*. He was dressed in what's commonly called a mini-skirt police uniform, and I caught a glimpse of his boxer shorts, which I really didn't want to see, so I quickly looked away.

He put his skirt back down, but Koga spread his legs and started talking.

"So, who do you think will win?"

"Hmm~... Maybe Class 3?"

"Ah~, Saeki does have a youthful face. He got a lot of cheers too."

Talking in a normal volume in the cramped backstage area, it was no surprise the person in question could hear. Saeki, who had been

brought up, looked over at us and shrugged shyly. That gesture fell into the 'cute' category, so he'd probably win.

"What about us?"

"Your 10-second appeal was actually pretty well-received, I think?"

"Besides, I didn't hear there were two people from Class 5."

"I think Saeki will win too."

Guys from other classes joined the conversation, and the seven of us tried to predict the winner.

We'd just settled on Saeki as the definite winner when the MC's voice came through.

"Alright then, all entrants, please come up on stage~!"

At that signal, student organizers guided us onto the stage. Seven guys from each grade, twenty-one in total, lined up on the stage. It was honestly cramped and stuffy.

We lined up with first-years, second-years, and third-years in the front, but the third-years seemed to be seriously aiming for victory, as there were many shorter senpai. Worried I might block the view if I stood in front, I shifted slightly to the side just as the MC started speaking.

"Well, everyone! Thank you for your votes~! Since the cross-dressing contest is the final event and we're running short on time, we apologize, but we will forgo individual comments! Now, let's proceed directly to announcing the voting results~!"

No sooner had he said that than the venue went dark *pa*, and spotlights started darting around erratically.

Next, a tense drum roll echoed through the gym.

"First, the winner for the first-years is Entry No. 6! It's Luna-chan~!"

Amidst enthusiastic applause, a spotlight flashed *pa* onto a petite student dressed in a sailor uniform. Checking the screen behind, I saw a boy with a cute face. It was a win you could nod along with.

"Next up, the second-years! The winner is~…… Entry No. 3! It's Saeki-chan~!"

As expected, Saeki was chosen.

Bathed in the spotlight, Saeki blushed again and smiled shyly. Immediately, applause and cheers erupted. I clapped for him too, and they moved on to the third-year announcement.

"And finally, for the third-years! The winner is! Entry No. 7! It's Aloe-chan!"

The spotlight shone again, revealing a dignified-looking senpai. Among the many 'cute' types, he stood out in a good way, I guess.

I turned away from the screen and looked at the three being awarded. Even though it was cross-dressing, they looked strangely proud up there receiving their awards.

The three bowed to the audience, and once again, enthusiastic applause and cheers filled the gym. Simultaneously, the chime signaling the end of the culture festival rang out.

"Essential cleaning is done, so that's all for today. There is a substitute holiday, so there's no school on Monday. Don't forge—... you won't forget a day off! We'll do a full clean-up on Tuesday, so please bring a dust cloth. Well then, good work today! Goodbye～!" *'Goodbye～!'*

After the final homeroom, students trickled out of the classroom. This school doesn't have pre- or post-festival events, so the culture festival was officially over. I was sitting on the floor organizing my belongings when I spotted the designated slippers with 'Watarai' written on them at the edge of my vision. I looked up to see Watarai smiling *nikori* at me.

"Are you heading home now, Hioki?"

"Hmm... Do you have plans after this, Watarai?"

"Plans? No, not really."

"What about Horita and the others?"

I called out to the three standing behind Watarai as well. All three shook their heads. It seemed everyone was just heading home after this.

Having confirmed the plans of all four, I held up a single ticket.

"Wanna go? All-you-can-eat."

"Eh, let's go!"

"For real, is it cool?"

"Wait, I'll message home saying I'm eating out."

Horita, Nakazato, and Morisaki's faces lit up *pa*, and they each pulled out their phones, presumably to contact their families. I looked at Watarai; he was also typing on his phone. While they were doing that, I finished getting ready. Then, I heard the sound of hurried footsteps running down the hallway. The sound stopped near the Class 5 door, and Tsujitani, Ino, and Mizunase peeked in.

"Hey! Let's walk home together!"

"More like, let's have an after-party!"

"Let's go to a family restaurant～!"

The three came into the classroom and looked at us expectantly. Checking the ticket in my hand, it said high school students could have up to 10 people. So I called out to Tsujitani and the others too.

"You guys coming? All-you-can-eat yakiniku."

"「「We're in!」」"

The three answered immediately, giving a sharp thumbs-up. I nodded, stood up, and slung my backpack and enamel bag over my shoulder. Suddenly, I went "Ah," and checked my wrist.

"Sorry, I forgot something. You guys go on ahead."

"I'll come too."

As I called out to the seven guys and headed for the door, Watarai fell into step beside me. Watarai usually comes with me, which is fine, but I actually had something I wanted to talk to him about, so this was even more convenient.

Horita said, "We'll wait by the school gate," so I nodded, and the two of us left the classroom. As we headed for the classroom that had been our waiting room, I spoke to Watarai.

"Sorry for showing you something unsightly today."

"Eh, why? You were cute."

"Ehh……? You weren't put off? Your reaction was kinda ambiguous."

"Hmm... Well, that was..."

Watarai hesitated as we went down the stairs.

If he was grossed out, I wished he'd just say so, but maybe Watarai was just being kind and considerate.

After a short silence, Watarai muttered softly.

"...How should I put it? I was... reconfirming things?"

"Reconfirming? What?"

"Things like, 'If Hioki were a girl, we wouldn't have been able to spend all that time together during the school trip,' or 'Maybe our relationship wouldn't have developed into romance.' I was thinking about that."

"Ah~……"

Walking down the hallway, I thought about it too.

It was true, if I were a girl, I doubt I could have been with Watarai from morning till night during the school trip, and maybe I wouldn't have had the chance to go to the beach or Tsumugi-kun's sports day either.

I opened the door to the vacant classroom where we'd spent so much time today. Watarai stopped near the entrance and murmured.

"I realized... I really do like the real, unadorned Hioki."

"Yeah, thank you."

I turned around and smiled. Watarai also smiled back, looking relieved. I stopped in front of the desk I'd been using and checked inside, retrieving my watch. I'd left it there when changing out of the cross-dressing outfit. I put the watch in the pocket of my enamel bag and walked over to Watarai. He stared intently at me, a slight frown on his face.

"Hioki, you're not... put off, are you?"

"Eh, by what?"

"You were looking up the meaning of this, weren't you?"

Saying that, Watarai tapped *ton ton* on his own temple area. I kinda figured he meant the hair oil.

I smiled and shook my head. But Watarai's expression remained clouded.

"Using it while hiding the meaning... normally, that would put someone off, right? If it bothered you, you really don't have to force yourself; just say so."

"No, I'm not forcing myself. If it bothered me, I'd say so... and if anything,"

I paused for a moment, lowered my gaze once, then slowly raised my eyelids.

"...it makes me happy, because it feels like you'll always be by my side."

I narrowed my eyes and smiled *nikori* at him. Watarai blinked, then flushed red and covered his mouth with his hand.

"……I love you."

"Me too."

I let out a small laugh. Just then, my phone in my pocket vibrated, signaling an incoming call. I took out my phone; Tsujitani's name and icon were displayed. I tapped the call button, letting the audio play through the speaker. Behind Tsujitani's voice, I could hear Ino and Mizunase's voices too.

'Hioki! The Frankfurter says he wants to apologize, so get back here soon!'
'More like, hurry up~! I'm hungry!'

'Let's go before it gets crowded~!'

"Ah... Okay."

I muttered just that and ended the call, then turned back to face Watarai. Even when we manage to be alone at school, it's hard to get a proper moment to ourselves. It's frustrating.

I smiled with a slight frown and started walking, calling out to Watarai.

"They're a restless bunch, aren't they?"

"For me, I'm on pins and needles, though."

"It's fine. We have this."

Saying that, I tapped my temple area with my finger, just like Watarai had. The scent that meant 'private property'.

Watarai glanced at me, then returned his gaze to the path ahead and muttered.

"Hair oil and perfume lose their scent eventually. I'd prefer something more permanent."

"Nothing expensive, please."

"...That depends on my mood."

Watarai replied with a hint of a sulky tone.

Knowing him, he'd probably give me something fairly expensive with a straight face, but if it made him happy, I guess it was fine.

I looked at Watarai's profile, illuminated by the evening sun, then laughed and said, "I see," before turning my gaze forward.

Whether we're officially dating or not, I think things with Watarai will always be like this. Personally, I find this distance comfortable—not too clingy, not too distant. No matter how our relationship changes from now on, I hope it stays like this forever.

As if reflecting my feelings, our two shadows stretched far down the hallway, bathed in the setting sun's light.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Actually, Watarai and I work fast and efficiently

Few chapters are left, and soon they will be finished. Please comment, I like reading

your little comments

The voice was at an ambiguous volume—I couldn't tell if he was talking to me or just muttering to himself.

"A white Christmas, is it?"

I looked up from the snow-white ground at my feet and glanced at the person next to me. Horita, who had uttered the solitary remark, had his face tilted towards the sky, his nose tinged red against the white backdrop. I followed his gaze, lifting my face a little higher. I squinted at the fluffy snowflakes drifting down slowly, then looked back at my feet. Since the snow's path was unpredictable, I'd decided against using an umbrella from the start.

It was a rare snowfall. And on Christmas Day, no less. The endlessly accumulating snow had probably already erased the two sets of footprints we'd left behind. Keeping my eyes fixed on the ground, I nodded slightly in response to Horita.

"Yeah. I heard it's the first time it's snowed on Christmas Day in 15 years."

"Fifteen years ago... I'd be 2 years old~. No memory of it."

"Me neither."

I let out a laugh, my breath visible in the cold air.

A crunching sound, like biting into hard candy, echoed in my ears. In

the distance, I could hear the voices of children, probably elementary school age. They were likely playing in the snow.

"Wonder if the trains are running."

"Hmm. Best case, 30 minutes... no, maybe an hour?"

Horita sniffled and answered while staring at his feet. I glanced at him and fumbled in my bag pocket for tissues. *Huh, where did I put them?* Right now, it was just Horita and me walking together, but the original plan was for six of us. The same group that went for yakiniku after the culture festival, minus Tsujitani and Ino. I was walking, so the trains didn't affect me, but Horita had apparently just barely made it to the station before the trains might have stopped.

Watarai, Morisaki, Nakazato, and Mizunase lived more than two stations away from the meeting point, so they got caught in the service suspension. The trains here only ran twice an hour, so even if they started again, it was doubtful they could get on one immediately. *More importantly, no tissues. Sorry.*

Apologizing inwardly, I turned my gaze to the nostalgic streets clad in white.

"This was my commute to middle school. There was a candy store around here..."

"Ah—! Now that you mention it, there was. I remember thinking it was rare to see one these days."

Horita had apparently taken this same route to school, as he nodded, "Uh-huh, uh-huh," as if remembering.

If we walked a little further, I thought we'd see the colorful stand of a small gachapon machine... Peeking around the corner with a slightly quickened pace, I saw the house I was looking for, its shutters tightly closed.

"Ah, it's closed."

"With this weather, I guess that makes sense."

Horita peered over my shoulder from behind and looked at the notice on the shutter. I also looked at the notice, staring at the characters for "Temporarily Closed" written in brush strokes. It was held up haphazardly with duct tape, and the left edge was starting to peel. It

would probably come off again, but I gently pressed my hand over it, sticking it back onto the shutter.

"I was thinking I'd buy something if it was open."

"Let's come again. Next time, with everyone."

Saying that, Horita started walking again with a *zaku zaku* crunch. I pulled my face away from the notice and followed him.

Just then, something fell from above, and a dull pain shot through my head.

"Yeowch……"

"Eh, what? You okay?"

Horita turned back, came over, and brushed the lump of snow off my head that had fallen on me. It seemed snow had piled up on the roof or power lines and then dropped. It was only a small amount, so that was good, but it fell from a height, so it hurt quite a bit. I made a sound, not from the cold but from the pain, and Horita's hand patted the spot where the snow had hit, as if to soothe it. Then, just as quickly, he pulled his hand away, looked back the way we'd come, and let out a sigh of relief.

"That was close..."

"Eh, wh-what is it?"

"Nah, just thought if Watarai saw that, he'd kill me."

"He... wouldn't do that."

I shook my head *purupuru* as if to shake off the remaining snow. *So they have noticed.* It's not like we're hiding our relationship, but we haven't announced it either. My stance is that I'll answer if asked, but it's probably pointless by now.

"Well, I've never seen Watarai really lose his temper."

"Ah—... Besides, at our age, you don't seriously lose your cool like that, right?"

We shared a wry smile and started walking carefully on the snow again, trying to avoid walking under power lines.

After a while, Horita spoke up as if remembering something.

"Speaking of which, there was another place I was curious about besides the candy store."

"Hmm?"

"If we go a bit further, there's a crazy mansion, right?"

"Ah—, yeah, there is."

If you turn right at the next intersection, there's a mansion that stands out—in a good way— within the residential area. The house visible through the gaps in the impressive gate looks like something out of a Western movie.

Turning towards the direction of that house, Horita let out an admiring sound.

"...It's amazing. Wonder what it's like inside."

"Curious?"

I slowed my pace and stopped.

Wondering why I'd stopped, Horita also halted, glanced briefly at the mansion's exterior, then turned to face me.

"If you ask if I'm curious, then yeah, but why?"

"Then let's go take a look."

"Haah?"

Saying that, I pressed the intercom button. The sound wasn't much different from my own house's, but combined with the exterior, it sounded upscale. Thinking that, a flustered Horita came running over. *Hey, hey, it's dangerous to run!*

"Wha...! Wha—! What are you doing?! Did you hit your head and turn stupid? Ugh, seriously... How am I supposed to explain this...?"

That's a harsh way to put it, but I'm perfectly normal. More importantly, this *is* our destination for today.

I've never seen Horita this panicked before, I thought leisurely as he shook me *gakun gakun*. Just then, the homeowner's voice came

through the intercom.

'Welcoooome~'

It was a much more relaxed voice than you'd expect from the owner of this mansion. Kind of reminded me of a convenience store clerk's voice.

Glancing at Horita, who was frozen in astonishment, I spoke to the homeowner through the intercom.

"Open the gate."

'Roge-er that! Party of twooo!'

A cheerful voice rang out, and with a *gachan*, the gate slid open to the sides. However, maybe because of the snow, it stopped *pita* before opening fully. It was wide enough to pass through, so I stepped onto the property.

Horita still seemed unable to process what was happening; he just stood there blinking.

"It's cold, let's go in quickly."

"Eh…… ah, …… yeah…… eh?"

I beckoned, and Horita hesitantly stepped onto the property. He walked carefully, looking around nervously. It wasn't the snow he was wary of; he seemed tense in this new environment.

We passed a small fountain and a now-frozen pond, reached the front door, and brushed the snow off our heads and clothes.

"A dream? Am I still asleep?"

"Ahaha! It's reality, I assure you."

I smiled at Horita, who was pinching his own cheek to check. Right on cue, the front door opened.

"Wheee-ce! Sorry for making you come all the way... Brrr!"

The face that popped out belonged to Ino.

He was wearing a T-shirt printed with a weird character you wouldn't expect from the owner of this mansion. And for some reason, it was

short-sleeved. *No wonder he's cold.*

"Thanks for having us."

"Ah…… Sorry for intruding……"

"Ooh, no need to be so formal! Tsujitani's waiting inside too!"

Ino grinned *nika* and held the door wide open, urging us to enter. Taking him up on his offer, I stepped into the entrance. Horita, who followed me in, let out a feeble "Fue…" sound.

I was shocked the first time I saw it too: a spiral staircase right in front, a chandelier on the ceiling, and rather artistic paintings adorning the walls. Ino said the antique style was his grandmother's taste.

Horita, not even taking off his shoes, was completely captivated by the interior. Ino laughed while preparing guest slippers.

"Don't stare so hard! C'mon, hurry up and get over here."

Saying that, Ino walked towards a door visible on the right. If I remember correctly, that's the living room.

I took off my shoes more carefully than usual, lined them up neatly, put on the slippers, and followed Ino. Horita trailed behind me like a baby duckling.

"And now, for the grand reveal of today's venue～!"

Ino made an air microphone with his hands, announced it dramatically, and flung the door open.

"「W-wow……」"

Horita and I both gasped, our eyes captured by what towered beyond the open door. A huge Christmas tree.

It stretched up freely towards the vaulted ceiling. I'd only ever seen one this size in a shopping mall.

"...He… Hey, look over here, I said! Oi—!"

As we were distracted by the tree, Tsujitani's voice reached us. Lowering my gaze, I saw him sitting on a leather sofa, legs crossed, sunglasses perched on his head, swirling a glass in his hand containing

a small amount of what looked like wine... but was probably grape juice.

Seeing that we'd finally looked his way, Tsujitani snorted *fun*.

"Welcome! To my humble abode! Let us welcome you!"

"「Ahh… yeah.」"

"Is that all?!"

I looked away from Tsujitani and gazed at the Christmas tree again. *It's seriously huge. Is it even real?*

Seeing our reaction, Tsujitani was clearly sulking. I glanced at him and spoke to Ino.

"Is this real?"

"No way! It's totally fake. When I said we were having a Christmas party, this huge truck showed up out of nowhere."

"Uh-huh…"

"Next thing I know, it's set up inside the house. I was shocked. It only arrived like, tens of minutes before you guys."

"What the…"

The story was on another level, and I couldn't find the right words. I looked back at the tree, and this time Horita spoke.

"Speaking of which, where are your parents…?"

"Huh? They're not here. Besides, this isn't my house; it's my grandparents' place."

"O-oh, really? Where are they now?"

"Overseas."

It had been quite a while since Ino first told me, so my memory was vague, but apparently his grandfather was a doctor.

He mostly worked overseas, came back to Japan once, opened a clinic, and after Ino's father became the director, he went back overseas.

Furthermore, he was also a professor at a famous university. Chairman of the clinic, overseas medical staff, professor—in short, a seriously impressive person. He apparently had this house built when he returned to Japan, because Ino was starting middle school. The reason being it was close to his grandson's school.

"That's amazing. I never thought I'd know someone this rich."

"Well, it's not like *I'm* rich. And I'd hate it if people kept their distance just because I'm from a rich family."

Ino laughed while scratching his head, then went "Ah."

"Oh, right, I just woke up and hadn't changed yet. I'll go do that. Just put your stuff anywhere and sit wherever."

Leaving that casual explanation, Ino headed for the stairs. *So that's why he was wearing that weird character shirt.* Watching him go, I approached the sofa where Tsujitani was. As I took off my jacket, Horita froze solid again.

"Eh... There's a fireplace. It's my first time seeing one."

"Ah—, that. Apparently, it gets hard to breathe if you actually light it."

Tsujitani answered while sinking into the sofa.

Horita said "Heh~" and hesitated about where to put his taken-off jacket. It was a bit damp from the snow, and given the house, he was probably being considerate. I was unsure too, so I asked Tsujitani.

"Where'd you put your jacket?"

"Over there. He said we can use the hangers."

" 'K."

Looking where Tsujitani pointed, I saw a coat rack, so I walked over there. Well, the coat rack was normal, but its location was in a separate room, like a sunroom or conservatory. When I entered, I could faintly hear the sound of an air conditioner, maybe for dehumidifying.

"It's huge... It's a terrace."

"Sure is."

I only associated places like this with drying laundry, but with potted plants and a table set here, it felt like a corner of a cafe.

It was all glass-paneled, with snow piled on top. It was dim now, but when the sun came out, the sunroom would probably be bathed in a bluish-white light. I hung up my jacket, and Horita and I returned to the sofa. Tsujitani started talking as he poured grape juice generously into glasses.

"Hey, listen to this~. When I got here today, Ino was still asleep."

"Ahh, he did say he just woke up."

"I was ringing the intercom like crazy and blowing up his phone!"

"So that's when the truck showed up?"

"Yep, he only woke up when the truck arrived."

Tsujitani's house isn't far from here, but it must have been tough waiting outside in the endlessly falling snow.

Nodding as I listened to Tsujitani, a question suddenly occurred to me.

"So, does that mean Ino was staying here? Alone?"

"Seems like it."

Tsujitani tilted his glass back *gui* and gulped down the juice *gubi gubi*. Staying over. Alone. Hearing that, I looked around the room's interior. The Western-style architecture, reminiscent of something from overseas, somehow reminded me of a horror movie I'd watched with Watarai and the others.

Staying alone in such a big house is impressive, I thought, feeling a sense of admiration, when suddenly a loud *gatan* sound rang out. I jumped, my shoulders jerking up sharply.

"Ow! I think I broke it! That's gonna bruise!"

A voice came from the second floor overlooking the atrium, and soon after, Ino appeared, hopping down the stairs on one foot. *There's also a staircase in the living room, by the way.* Ino plopped down *bofu* next to Tsujitani and rubbed his shin, which he'd bumped on something.

"Oww~, yep, definite bruise. Possible fracture."

"Get your grandpa to fix it?"

Tsujitani said that and flicked *pechin* Ino's shin. *Stop that.* Ino slapped Tsujitani's thigh in retaliation, then stood up and called out to Horita and me.

"You guys want something to drink? Coke, orange juice, tea... Ah, whatever. I'll bring everything."

"Ah, I'll help too."

Horita stood up at almost the same time as Ino started walking and followed him. I also stood up, but my arm was grabbed *gashi*.

"It's boring by myself."

"Ugh, what a pain... I need to wash my hands, and you should come too."

This time, I pulled on Tsujitani's arm and dragged him *zuru zuru* towards the kitchen. Maybe because walking was too much trouble, Tsujitani suddenly climbed onto my back. I almost lost my balance and quickly planted my feet.

"That was close! You, seriously…"

"It's fine, think of it as club training."

Saying that, Tsujitani laughed *kerakera* on my back. He's shorter than me, but he's not light at all.

I started to crouch to put him down, but he clung on like a koala, so I gave up and carried him to the kitchen on my back.

When we reached the sink, Tsujitani readily got off my back and ran over to Ino and Horita. After washing my hands and borrowing a towel hanging on the wall, I turned around to see Ino and Horita transferring snacks onto plates at the kitchen counter. I also picked up a bag and poured the individually wrapped chocolates onto a plate. *Ah, so that's why Tsujitani got off so easily.* Just as I thought, he'd already opened a few packages and was munching away.

We also ate a few snacks, then loaded the snacks and drinks onto a cart and returned to the living room.

Tsujitani plopped down *bofun* onto the sofa again and slid down into a reclining position.

"I wonder how much longer until they get here~."

"Ah, but it seems the trains are running again."

Horita muttered while scrolling on his phone.

We'd already shared the location, so that wasn't a problem, but it might be past noon by the time everyone gathered.

It was a shame; I'd wanted to surprise everyone by showing them this place as the guide, but Horita's reaction was good, so maybe it all worked out. I also unlocked my phone and opened my private chat with Watarai. I flicked through the keys to type a message.

How long until you think you'll arrive?

The message was marked as read immediately.

I didn't know if he was bored waiting or just happened to open it, but just seeing the 'Read' notification made me happy.

Just got to the station. Gonna meet up with the others, so maybe another 30 minutes or so?

Along with the message, a fox stamp saying 'Sorry' was sent. *You don't need to apologize. This is much better than not being able to come at all.*

It's fine. Be careful.

I sent the message, confirmed the 'Read' status, and closed my phone. Right as I was putting my phone away, Ino clattered *katan* some paper cups that looked out of place here onto the table and raised his voice.

"Eh! Wait, isn't this group all from the same middle school?!"

At Ino's words, I checked the friends present.

It was true, everyone here was from the same middle school, but what about it?

"When I came here yesterday, I did a bit of cleaning and found something."

"「「Found something?」」"

My voice overlapped with Horita's and Tsujitani's.

Ino nodded "Uh-huh," stood up, and turned on the huge TV on the wall in front of us. He skillfully adjusted some settings, and the screen suddenly changed. I heard the sound of *pachi pachi* clapping, and a spotlight shone in the center. *Wait, is this□□…*

"「「The music recital……」」"

Our voices overlapped again.

And this has nothing to do with cleaning! Where exactly were you cleaning, man? I glanced at Ino, but he was staring intently at the screen.

Even though it was called a music recital, it wasn't any different from a choir contest. We just sang.

"Whoa, nostalgic."

"What class were you guys in?"

"Let's see… this is from first year, so me and Hioki were in Class 1, Tsujitani and Horita were in Class 2, I think."

Ino paused the screen once to check the recording name, then played it again.

"The resolution is way too good. You can almost see our pores."

"Right? Don't underestimate the rich."

Tsujitani leaned forward, and Ino snorted triumphantly. *That's what you choose to boast about?*

I looked back at the screen, which showed a close-up of Ino and his former classmates on either side. *We look so young.*

"Your eyes are kinda wandering, aren't they?"

"Well, I was curious about the people in the audience!"

I could understand the feeling.

I also remember looking for my mom in the audience. Just when I thought it was only Ino, the camera work suddenly panned to show the entire venue, then slowly slid across, showing all the classmates in detail. *What insane service.*

"Ah! There's Hioki! Whoa, pause!"

"Say so sooner! Wait, I'll rewind!"

"Hey, stop, don't rewind, fast forward!"

I grabbed the remote first, but Ino, ignoring me, pulled a tablet out of a desk drawer and started operating it.

Dammit! You have one of those too?! Rich people!

Despite my efforts, the screen paused on a close-up of me. Tsujitani and Ino burst out laughing *geragera*.

"Ahaha! So tiny!"

"What kind of face is that?!"

So embarrassing.

I was really short back in first year of middle school. They tailor the uniforms expecting you to grow, so I looked kinda swallowed by mine.

Back then, the lights were bright and hot, so I remember I was frowning the whole time.

"...How long are you gonna keep it paused? Hurry up and move on."

"Ah—, sorry, sorry. Next is Class 2."

Urging him on, Ino fast-forwarded a bit and played the footage of Class 2's performance. Since his own kid wasn't in it, it was mostly wide shots, as expected. But the Ino household lived up to its reputation, and the detailed slide-show service was displayed again.

"Ooh, Tsujitani."

Horita muttered, so I hurriedly pressed the pause button to stop it. However, it paused on him with his mouth wide open, so I thoughtfully rewound a bit before pausing. *More importantly,* "「Where are you looking?」"

Tsujitani was looking in a completely different direction from the conductor. I thought maybe I'd paused at a bad moment, but no matter where I paused, he wasn't looking at the conductor. *What was he even doing?*

"Ah—, this... There was this guy in the front row rowing an imaginary boat..."

"That's no reason to stare that hard."

"Nah, that's not all. I don't know if it was a wig or what, but every time his head bobbed, it looked like the wig was gonna come off."

Well, in that case, it can't be helped. That would be distracting. Well, regardless of where he was looking, he was still singing, so it's a pass, right? I pressed the play button *cachick* to resume the video. Next, Horita appeared. Until now, I hadn't noticed unless someone pointed it out, but for some reason, my eyes were drawn to Horita without even searching.

Either I or Ino—I don't know who—pressed the pause button at the same time, and we stared at the screen for a while.

Suddenly, Ino and Tsujitani started making a fuss.

"Eh? Wait, wait, wait, the art quality is totally different, isn't it? Oi, God! Is there no justice in this world?!"

"He's in first year, right? 12 or 13? Eh, that's not fair! I don't get it, but it makes me mad at his genes! And it makes the me from before look like a total idiot!"

What a unique way to get angry.

I glanced at Horita next to me; he was leisurely taking a picture of the screen with his phone. *See, learn from him. This is the composure of a handsome guy.* I snorted *fun*, pressed the play button again, and sank back into the sofa. As the song neared its end, Horita stood up smoothly and called out to Ino.

"Hey, can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure. Go out the door, walk straight, pass the stairs, turn right, walk a bit, and it's on the left-hand side of a weird ornament."

Not the kind of directions you hear for a normal house. Horita repeated it a few times, said " 'K," and left the living room. After Horita left, Tsujitani stealthily reached his arm out, so I hurriedly grabbed the remote and held it up high.

"Tch, you noticed. Hand it over quietly, would you?"

"Hah? Why?"

"I was gonna rewind and soothe my frustration by looking at Hioki's

face."

"Hey, don't use my face to calm down!"

I shook my head side to side in refusal, but Tsujitani didn't seem like he was going to give up, inching closer *jiri jiri* on the sofa.

I thought if I stood up, I'd be taller and could win, but Tsujitani moved first. He reached for the hand holding the remote and tried to climb on top of me. Pushing Tsujitani back with one hand while resisting, I raised my voice.

"Hey! Just use Ino's tablet! You don't need to bother with the remote!"

"It ran out of battery 'cause I hadn't used it in ages! Don't underestimate the rich!"

"I'm not underestimating anyone! And a dead battery has nothing to do with being rich!"

While Tsujitani and I were scuffling on the sofa, the living room door suddenly opened.

"「「「……？」」」"

Tsujitani and I, tangled up on the sofa, and Ino, who was plugging in a charger, all looked up at the door simultaneously. There stood the four delayed-by-train members. *Eh, why? How did they get in? Did the intercom ring?* As we stared in astonishment, Mizunase took the lead and entered the living room.

"Whoa, the Christmas tree is huge... What's this? Were we interrupting something fun?"

At Mizunase's words, I snapped back to reality and pushed Tsujitani's shoulder firmly, crawling out from under him.

Worst possible timing. And Mizunase's phrasing.

I let out a sigh and straightened my disheveled hair and clothes on the soft rug under the sofa.

"Welcome~! Jackets go over there, otherwise just sit anywhere. Party of fourrr!" Following Ino's welcome call, Tsujitani continued in a high-pitched voice, "Welcome~!" *What was that about?*

Ino placed the charging tablet on the table, stood up, and walked

deeper into the room. The four who had been standing frozen at the living room entrance took off their jackets and approached.

"Eh, for real? There's a fireplace."

"Can I take a picture of this?"

Nakazato's eyes sparkled at the fireplace's existence, while Morisaki, taking off his jacket, stared intently at the Christmas tree.

"Morning."

"Ah… Good morning."

I returned the greeting to Watarai, who was now standing in front of me. *The situation from a moment ago is super awkward, but I should apologize properly.* I stood up from the sofa and called out to Watarai.

"Let's go hang up our jackets."

"Yeah. It's seriously amazing. I was shocked at how huge it was from the entrance."

"I was super surprised the first time I came too."

Watarai looked around the room as we walked.

When we reached the sunroom, we passed Mizunase, who had already finished hanging his jacket.

"Hey, can I just grab a drink?"

"Should be fine, but write your name on the paper cup."

"Roge-er."

Mizunase said that and skipped back to the living room, looking quite pleased. Watching him go, I confirmed that Nakazato and Morisaki hadn't arrived yet and spoke to Watarai, who was hanging his jacket on a hanger.

"Um, about earlier... that wasn't intentional, it was an accident, so, that... sorry."

"Why? You don't need to apologize."

"You're not mad?"

"Nah, I'm not mad."

Saying that, Watarai hung his jacket on the rack with a *clack*. *Thank goodness.* I let out a sigh of relief at Watarai's gentle tone. Watarai smiled *nikko*, approached me standing by the door, and intertwined his cold fingers with mine.

"But for the rest of today, so that doesn't happen again, I'll stay right by your side."

Yeah, figured. So he is mad... or is this more like jealousy? Anyway, I had no intention of refusing, so I nodded *koku koku*. Just then, Morisaki's voice came from behind.

"Hey, don't get all lovey-dovey wherever you feel like."

Morisaki let out an exasperated sigh, brushed past me and Watarai, and entered the sunroom. Nakazato followed, carrying his jacket.

While hanging his jacket, Nakazato peeked towards the living room, then called out to me and Watarai.

"Sounds like they're ordering pizza, so they want us to decide what to get."

"Ooh, pizza sounds good."

Morisaki and Nakazato, having finished hanging their jackets, left the sunroom with us and returned to the living room.

A few pizza shop flyers were spread out on the table.

"Hmm, maybe the classic Margherita?"

"Teriyaki Chicken is good."

"Ehh? Let's order chicken separately."

"How many are we ordering anyway?"

Tsujitani, Ino, and Mizunase leaned forward from the sofa, staring intently at the menu, while Horita, who had returned from the bathroom, was noting down options on his phone.

"Why don't we all point at the same time on the count of three and order the one with the most votes?"

I suggested this to the four scrutinizing the menu while pulling Watarai's hand and making him sit next to me. The four looked up and exclaimed, "That's it!" First, we each narrowed it down to one choice.

"Ready? On three□□……"

At Ino's signal, everyone pointed to a spot on the menu. The ones with the most votes were Tomato Basil, Potato & Bacon, and Mentaiko Mayonnaise. Assuming one piece per person, three pizzas might be a bit light, but it should be fine if we ordered some side dishes.

"What about cake? Wanna go for two whole ones?"

Mizunase's eyes sparkled. He has a sweet tooth and seemed more excited about the cake than the pizza.

Hearing that, Ino went "Ah!" and looked at Mizuzase.

"Crap. Forgot about the cake."

"Ehh, but it's Christmas."

"We can just stop by before picking up the pizza, right?"

Saying that, Tsujitani started searching for nearby cake shops on his phone. Then Watarai spoke up.

"Aren't most places reservation-only on Christmas Day?"

"Ah—... You're probably right. Might be a waste of time to go."

Morisaki also looked up from his phone and shrugged. Nakazato next to him, who isn't fond of sweet things, looked uninterested in the cake. I looked at Mizunase; he looked incredibly sad, his eyebrows drooping.

"If there isn't any, why not just make it ourselves? Buy the ingredients."

It was my own suggestion, but I thought it was a pretty good idea. At my proposal, Mizunase thought for a moment, then looked around at everyone present.

"Are there any patissiers among our esteemed guests?"

There aren't.

Mizunase's statement raised the bar way too high, so I added a clarification.

"Not necessarily that professional. Just someone who could make one by following a recipe."

Saying that, I also looked around. I saw a few people making faces that said, "I could probably manage that..."

Watarai, Horita, Nakazato, Tsujitani, Ino... I don't know why the latter two looked so proud, but with three people, it should be fine.

At least it seemed we could have cake, even if homemade, so I felt relieved for now. With the cake discussion settled, Ino operated his phone and opened the pizza ordering screen.

"Tomato Basil, Potato Bacon, Mentaiko Mayo... I'll just add some side dishes on my own."

Saying that, he checked the 'Store Pickup' box without entering the address and pressed the confirm button.

A few seconds later, the words 'Order Complete' appeared along with an order number and pickup time. Ino took a screenshot, then looked up.

"Ready around 1:30."

"I'm hungry~"

"Let's play games until then."

And so, we decided to play games until it was time to leave the house.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way!"

"Wait! That's off the course!"

"You don't have to get all the coins! Don't reverse!"

Watarai, Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki were competing in a famous kart racing game, while the other club members were shouting words of 'encouragement'—or more accurately, instructions.

Whether they don't usually play TV games or are just bad at them, the three of them were amiably competing for last place.

Only Nakazato was somewhere in the middle of the pack. Maybe he plays with his younger brother.

"I might lose……"

Watarai clicked the controller softly and muttered under his breath. I glanced at the screen to check the ranking of the character he was controlling—12th place. But he had an item, so there was a good chance he could make a comeback right at the end. Just a few meters from the finish line. I could see the back of the character in front, so I gently placed my right hand over Watarai's right hand, trying not to disturb him too much. His fingers twitched in response.

Keeping my hand there, I pressed the button on the back of the controller with a *click*, activating the item. The item shot forward and hit the 11th-place character with a soft *pokon*.

"Ah."

It seemed Morisaki was the one controlling the 11th-place character. Surprised by the sudden event, he let out a small, involuntary sound.

My bad. Thinking that, I snorted softly through my nose just as Watarai's character crossed the finish line, and a cheerful BGM filled the room.

As the results screen displayed on the TV, Morisaki looked at Watarai and me and scowled, displeased.

"Don't cheat."

"Wasn't cheating. My hand just slipped while we were being lovey-dovey."

"...Yeah, yeah, sure."

I shrugged exaggeratedly. Morisaki sighed and turned back to the screen. *Surely it's fine if I tease Morisaki back once in a while.*

Basking in a strange sense of accomplishment, I shifted my gaze from Morisaki to Watarai, who was staring intently at the controller. Following his line of sight, I gasped and pulled my hand away from the controller.

That was close. Keeping my hand there would definitely look suspicious. I checked if anyone around—mainly my club mates—had seen, when

Watarai called my name. I turned my face back to him and saw him raising his hand. I understood it was a high-five to celebrate the come-from-behind victory. I went to slap his hand *pachi* and pull away, but he grabbed my retreating hand *gyu* and pulled it down without letting go.

"Thanks for pressing the button for me."

"Yeah."

On the leather sofa, Watarai smiled as he intertwined his fingers with mine. Feeling ticklish, I smiled back, just as Mizunase, who was selecting the next stage, exclaimed, "Ah!" Thinking we'd been seen, I hurriedly tried to pull my hand back. Watarai, probably thinking the same, looked slightly panicked as he turned towards Mizunase. However, Mizunase's exclamation didn't seem to be because of us; his gaze was fixed on the ornate wall clock.

"It's cake time!"

"It's not cake time, it's pizza time. Pii-zza time."

Tsujitani poked the happily exclaiming Mizunase with his elbow, then stood up and headed towards the sunroom. Sure enough, the clock showed exactly 1:30 PM. Following Tsujitani's lead, everyone started shuffling towards the sunroom. *Wait, eight people is way too many.* No matter how big the sunroom is, it's too cramped for a bunch of growing high school boys to get ready in.

I'll just go last, I thought, waiting near the entrance. Tsujitani, who had entered first, started handing out jackets from the far end. "Whose is this?" he asked, passing them along in a relay until they reached their owners.

"This one's... Ino's. This one's... Mizunase's. And this is Hioki's."

He identified the owners for just these three jackets.

Everyone except Ino and Mizunase looked puzzled.

Well, that makes sense. His method was "scent." In other words, he had sniffed the jackets. If these had been girls' jackets, the next time I saw Tsujitani would probably be in prison. But it was a common thing in the club. Identifying the owner of discarded jerseys by smell before checking the names... Well, he might be a pervert either way. *I've never done it, though.*

I buried my face in my own jacket, which had been passed via Horita from Tsujitani, and took a deep breath *sun*.

Honestly, I can't really smell my own house's scent. Tsujitani once told me, "Hioki's house smells kinda like a shop," but I never figured out what he meant. Tilting my head, I put on my jacket. Watarai peeked at my face.

"What's up?"

"Nothing, just wondering what my own house smells like... Can you smell anything?"

I felt nervous even though I was the one who asked. I started worrying, *What if it's a smell Watarai doesn't like?*

I watched him. He thought for a moment, then faced forward and spoke.

"I wouldn't say there's one specific thing, but……. I think it's a nice smell."

"Do you really mean that?"

"I do. It's just... it feels kinda perverted, you know, complimenting someone's house smell."

"Well... I guess so."

At least he didn't seem to dislike it, so I felt relieved.

I let out a sigh of relief, then returned to the living room and shouldered my bag. A tiny bit of mischief sprouted in me.

Walking towards the entrance, I spoke to Watarai beside me in a low voice.

"So, you *have* been conscious of my smell."

"……."

Oh? Uh-oh?

I thought he'd get flustered or blush. Or maybe this silence was an admission. His unexpected reaction left me feeling more confused. Watarai then made a show of thinking before turning to me. He leaned in a little closer and smiled *nikori*.

"I have. I mean, we slept together, didn't we?"

"……Ah."

That's right.

During the school trip, we slept side-by-side the first night, and on the second night, we even shared a bed. It was a single bed for two guys, so we ended up pressed together whether we liked it or not...

Remembering it made me embarrassed. I tried to turn my face away from Watarai, but he pinched my cheeks and forced me to look back.

"Remember now?"

"Y-yeah, I remember. I remember, so let me go."

I grabbed Watarai's wrists with both hands, trying to pry them off, but he paid no mind and continued playing with my cheeks.

While we were engaged in this strange struggle, I felt the outside air hit my skin. I shivered from the cold and heard Tsujitani and Ino's voices from a short distance away.

"Ooh! The snow stopped!"

"Ooh~, it's clearing up."

"Let's hurry and go buy cake!"

Mizunase tapped the floor with the toe of his shoe *ton ton* and went outside. Tsujitani and Ino were making a racket, probably playing in the snow in the garden. Left behind, the rest of us started putting on our shoes. Tsujitani and the others wore sneakers, but many of Watarai's group had boot types, so they were busy tying laces and zipping them up.

I wore rain boots. Not the heavy-duty ones farmers wear, but ankle-length ones with a design not much different from boots. Easy to slip on.

Tsujitani's group went straight out, but Watarai's group checked their appearance in the large standing mirror in the entranceway before each heading outside.

"Ah, by the way, what about the key?"

Nakazato turned back to me just before stepping out the front door. I wanted him to ask Ino, but the homeowner himself seemed busy trying to get ice off the fountain. *What is he even doing?*

Even though it's someone else's house, I actually know where the key is. More precisely, it's hanging on the wall, so you see it without having to look. There were several keys hanging there for the garage, cars, etc., but conveniently, each had a plaque with text engraved on it. I borrowed the key under the plaque marked 'Front Door' and went outside.

I confirmed everyone was out, then locked the door. Making sure it was securely locked, I walked over to Ino.

Reaching near the fountain, I squinted against the glare and reached my hand out to Ino. It wasn't that Ino was dazzling, but the sun had come out, and the light reflecting off the snow was blinding.

"Ino, the key."

"Ooh, thanks."

Ino, standing on the edge of the fountain, turned around and reached out his arm. Maybe I should have paid a bit more attention. Just as his fingers were about to reach it, Ino's foot slipped from the edge.

"Whoa! Hioki, help!"

"Hah?!"

Don't ask for the impossible. There was no distance, so I couldn't easily get into a position to help. Bracing for impact, I squeezed my eyes shut *kyu*, but my arm was pulled, and my body tilted backward.

The expected impact never came. I cautiously opened my eyes to find Watarai holding me, while Ino was face-down in the snow. *Uh... sorry about that.* Deciding to ignore Ino for the moment, I turned to Watarai.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Watarai looked down at me and smiled *nikori*. Ah—, he's dazzling. Maybe it's because the snow acts like a reflector, but he looks even more radiant.

As I was starting to get captivated by Watarai, Ino's voice came from

below.

"Ugh, so co-old…… More importantly, *I* wanted to be saved too."

"Sorry. My hand couldn't reach."

"Yeah, right~. Liar, liar, pants on fire."

As Ino brushed the snow off and got up, Watarai offered a hand with an apologetic smile. Watching Ino take Watarai's hand and stand, I realized something and checked my own hands. With a hint of panic, I called out to Ino.

"Hey, the key?"

"Eh? Don't you have it, Hioki?"

"...I don't. I thought you'd already taken it."

"Hah? I don't have it either."

Ino flapped his hands *hira hira* while brushing off snow, showing he had nothing. Which means...

"Seems like it fell somewhere," Watarai muttered, looking down.

Seriously? I looked at my feet and slumped my shoulders. It didn't look obvious where it was. The surroundings were covered in snow, and Ino's fall probably made it even messier.

But Ino himself looked perfectly calm. *Where does that composure come from?*

"It's fine if we lose one. I'll go get the spare key."

"No, the point is, we don't *have* the key to get that spare key now."

"Ah, right. Well, don't worry. There's a transmitter to find the key, I'll go get that."

"*That's* what I'm saying! We don't have the key to get *that* transmitter either!"

"Ah, right."

Does he even understand the situation?

While we were having this comedy routine-like conversation, Watarai burst out laughing, bent down, and started searching for the key. I also crouched and began pushing snow aside. Dirt and stones looked like keys, making it confusing. Just then, Nakazato called out from behind.

"What's up?"

"Dropped the key."

"Seriously? Hey! They dropped the key!"

Nakazato called out to Horita, Morisaki, Tsujitani, and Mizunase. Thinking they were coming to help search, they crouched and started moving snow. I thought having everyone look would make it faster, but that didn't seem to be the case, as Tsujitani's voice came from behind.

"Well, we'll have a snowball fight over here until you find it~!"

At least help us look!

Well, it's Tsujitani, so what can you do? I kept my eyes on the ground, searching for the key, when I heard the sound of a snowball hitting nearby. Very close by.

"Oww……"

A voice lower than usual reached my ears.

Hesitantly, I looked up to see Watarai holding the back of his head, face down.

"Are you oka……"

Before he could finish, Watarai scooped up a handful of snow, turned around, and threw a snowball in the direction it had come from.

The snowball Watarai threw hit Horita squarely on the shoulder.

"Ow! It wasn't me!"

The hit Horita pointed at Tsujitani, then raised both hands beside his face in a gesture of surrender.

Tsujitani, exposed by Horita, looked panicked for a second, but then raised another snowball with a grin.

"Just avenging Ino..."

"Then I'll avenge Horita!"

Saying that, Mizunase threw a snowball this time, which hit Nakazato on the head.

"Ow! That's packed hard~!"

The hit Nakazato shook his head *purupuru* and started gathering snow. He made a snowball about the size of both his hands and threw it one-handed towards Mizunase. But whether it was the snowball's size or his throwing form, it went way off course from Mizunase's position.

And Nakazato's snowball hit Morisaki's back and shattered.

"Oww, damn……."

Morisaki stood up, put away his phone, and glared *jiro* in our direction. Watarai, Ino, and I all pointed *su* at Nakazato in unison. But Morisaki seemed more annoyed about being hit than caring who threw it.

Watching Morisaki start making a snowball, I noticed a small snowman in the background. *Looks like he was taking a picture of that. How cute.* Just as I thought that, Morisaki's thrown snowball hit Ino.

Incredible. No one's hitting their intended target.

"Ow~, dammit! Don't underestimate the Badminton Club!"

There's nothing to underestimate about that.

It would've been cooler if it was the Baseball Club.

From there, things just got crazy. Snowballs flew, meaningless barricades were built, and it started feeling like a survival game.

I was the only one left crouched on the ground near the fountain, watching the scene. More importantly...

"Find the key already……."

And what about the pizza and cake? Are they just fine? My worried mutter was swallowed up by my friends' noisy commotion.

"Welcome~!"

A clerk dressed in a Santa outfit greeted us cheerfully. The shop was decorated in a Christmas theme of red and green, filled with the sound of a festive Christmas song.

"Excuse me, I have a pickup order..."

Ino showed his phone to the clerk, probably displaying the screenshot he'd taken earlier. Watching his back, the rest of us crowded into a corner of the vacant counter seats. Perhaps because it had been snowing, there were only a few other customers. But it was Christmas Day. From behind the register counter, the sound of ringing phones was constant. Probably people from generations less familiar with online orders were phoning in their orders.

"Good thing we found the key, huh~."

Tsujitani muttered while spinning his chair halfway around. In the end, I was the one who found the key. Well, I was the only one still looking, so it was natural. I guess it's true that it's darkest under the lamp post—the key was lying right where we had first started looking. It was fortunate it hadn't accidentally gotten mixed into someone's snowball.

"I still feel like there's snow inside my clothes."

"Hey, make sure you shake the snow off outside~!"

As Mizunase flapped the hem of his clothes *pata pata*, Nakazato pointed outside and sighed. But Mizunase didn't seem inclined to leave the warm shop; he stopped his hands and sat back down in his chair.

By the time I found the key and looked up, my friends were almost completely covered in snow. Plus, the pickup time was approaching, so the moment they realized the key was found, we hurried to the shop. On the way, people slipped and fell, so snow got into their clothes and shoes everywhere.

Since I was focused on finding the key, I was less snow-covered than the others, but my hands were bright red and hurt a bit from handling too much snow. Rubbing my cold hands gently, Ino called out from the direction of the register.

"Hey~! Someone come help carry this!"

I looked over to see him pointing at bags containing the pizza and side

dishes. Three people moved in response to Ino's call: Watarai, Horita, and Nakazato. *Talk about eldest son energy... or maybe they're just genuinely good guys.*

"Morisaki, you're not going?"

"Having too many people is pointless anyway."

I called out to Morisaki, who was fiddling with his phone. He peeked towards the register, then put his phone away as he answered. *If his older brother was like Ryoto-san, I imagine he'd be bossed around a lot, but it seems he was raised quite indulgently.* I was thinking how nice that was when Ino, finished paying, returned with Watarai, Horita, and Nakazato carrying the items.

"The pizzas are huge."

"Since it's store pickup, they threw in an extra one for free."

Horita and Nakazato peered into the bags, their faces breaking into happy smiles. The delicious smell of pizza wafted over, making my stomach growl. Then Mizunase stood up and quickly headed for the door.

"Alright! Let's go get cake!"

His obsession is impressive.

We all shuffled out of the shop and started walking in the opposite direction from Ino's house. Most of the shutters were closed on this street with the shopping arcade, but there was a crowd gathered around the cake shop and Western confectionery store.

"Want me to carry something?"

"Nah, I'm good."

I pointed at the bags and asked Watarai, walking beside me, but he gently refused. *Oh well,* I thought, turning forward again, when Watarai let out a soft "Ah." Wondering what it was, I looked back at him, and our eyes met.

"Actually, let me."

"Yeah, sure."

I held out my hand. For some reason, Watarai stuck his hand into his

jacket pocket. Tilting my head, confused by his action, something was placed in my outstretched hand. It was faintly warm. *Is this...*

"A hand warmer..."

"Your hands looked cold, so keep that. And... thanks for finding the key."

I felt warmth spreading not just in my hands, but from deep inside my heart. Letting my softened smile stay, I nodded *koku koku*. Watarai smiled contentedly and turned forward again.

I really, seriously love him so much. Clasping the hand warmer between both hands, I let my cheeks relax again.

"Whoa, it's super crowded."

"But I'm going. As long as there's cake there."

"That's not cool at all~!"

When we reached the front of the cake shop, Tsujitani and Ino frowned, but Mizunase wore an expression like he was heading into battle as he gripped the door handle. It seemed the option of turning back wasn't even in his mind.

"Hey, is it cool if we head back first?"

"Me too~, pizza gets less tasty when it's cold."

Horita and Nakazato held up the bags, and Tsujitani and Ino also started walking back home. Just as I was about to turn my body to leave as well, my arm was grabbed *gatto*. I looked back to see Mizunase looking sad, his eyebrows drooping.

"At least one of you stay with me!"

"Well, it would be lonely."

"No, that's not it. It'd be bad if I didn't have enough money."

"Oh, *that's* why."

Mizunase didn't seem like he was going to let go of my arm, tightening his grip further. Giving up, I was about to tell the others I'd go with Mizunase when I saw Morisaki swapping the bags he was carrying with Watarai.

"You guys are on cake duty."

Morisaki said that and headed back home.

Left behind with Mizunase and Watarai, we saw off our departing friends. Mizunase finally let go of my arm.

"So we can just choose whatever?"

"Seems like it."

Mizunase called out as he opened the door. Replying, I held the door open. Catching Watarai's eye, I said, "After you." He smiled, said "Thanks," and entered the shop. Hearing the bell attached to the door instead of an entry chime, I stepped inside and looked towards the display case. Whole cakes were out of the question, and even the regular cakes were mostly sold out. The customers here now were probably all just picking up pre-orders. While I was looking around leisurely, Mizunase strode *suta suta* over to the display case and started talking to a clerk.

I couldn't hear the conversation from here, but Mizunase's back gradually seemed to shrink, so it looked like buying a whole cake was out of the question.

"Thinking back to the school trip, Mizunase really has a sweet tooth, huh."

At Watarai's words, I recalled Mizunase piling his plate high with cake first thing in the morning during the school trip.

I was about to nod with a wry smile when a question popped into my head.

"The school trip... you guys weren't friends yet, right? You and Mizunase?"

"Ah……."

Watarai looked startled and covered his mouth.

I thought he might have just happened to see Mizunase, but back then, Watarai and Mizunase shouldn't have known each other.

"Were you... interested in Mizunase?"

"No, back then, it was, well,…… I just happened to see him while

I was watching you."

"……I see."

So that's it.

You were watching me a lot, huh. Thinking I'd been on his mind since back then is embarrassing.

Feeling heat gather in my face, Watarai muttered discontentedly beside me.

"Back then, I thought my heart would break from jealousy."

"Th-that much?"

"Yeah. Well, it turned out I got to eat cake with you too, Hioki, so it's fine now."

Saying that, Watarai peered at me and smiled *nikko*. *Right now, it's my heart that feels like it's breaking every day.* I didn't say it out loud, but thinking it showed on my face, I averted my gaze—just as Mizunase came trudging back, looking dejected.

"They said there aren't any..."

"That's too bad."

"What about regular ones, not whole cakes? Looks like there are a few left."

Saying that, Watarai pointed at the display case. Mizunase looked up as if remembering, but for some reason, he hesitated.

"What's wrong?"

"Weeell... After what just happened, going back over there feels kinda awkward."

"Ah—..."

I get the feeling.

It feels awkward to go back, thinking the clerk might be like, "This guy again?" Feeling sympathetic towards Mizunase, Watarai stepped forward and spoke up.

"Then I'll go buy them. What do you want?"

"Eh, are you sure?"

Mizunase's face lit up happily. He pointed towards the display case and requested his two desired cakes.

"What about you, Hioki?"

"I'll go with you."

"I see."

Watarai's face broke into a smile, and he walked towards the display case. I followed him. As expected, the display case was nearly empty, so it didn't take long to decide. Looking at the few remaining cakes, I turned to Watarai.

"Should we buy for everyone? There are barely eight left."

"Huh? No. This is a privilege just for those who came here."

"Ooh... you're pretty mean."

"I never said I had a nice personality."

Watarai laughed as he said that, then pointed to *this one* and the *Gâteau Chocolat. I think you're plenty nice just for buying them for Mizunase.* I watched Watarai's profile, then looked back at the display case and pointed.

"I'll have the fruit tart."

"Okay. I'll go order them, then."

Watarai looked up from the display case and called out to the clerk. The female clerk, upon seeing Watarai, blushed slightly as she assisted him. *She probably wouldn't imagine that just minutes ago, this same guy was frolicking in the snow like a kid.* Once all the selected cakes were ready, we moved to the register. While the clerk was boxing the cakes, I looked towards the baskets near the counter. I picked up a bag containing a few muffins and gently tugged on the hem of Watarai's jacket.

"Can I get these too?"

"Sure, as many as you want."

"Haha, just one is fine."

Laughing, I placed it on the counter. Just then, the clerk arrived with the box of cakes, and Watarai said, "This too, please," while I was still mid-laugh. While Watarai was paying, I turned and beckoned Mizunase over with a hand gesture. Mizunase looked up from his phone and hurried over to the register.

"Here. Hold this."

"Seriously, thank you."

Mizunase took the box of cakes and the bag of muffins, thanking me and Watarai with a smile.

After finishing the payment and leaving the store, I spoke to Watarai as we walked.

"Show me the receipt later."

"Huh? It's really fine, don't worry about it."

"Eh, but I feel bad..."

"Ah... Well then, you can just do something for me in return, that's fine."

"Do something like what?"

"Hmm... Like hold hands, or hug me?"

"Th-that's really enough?"

We've done things like that plenty of times before, and we've touched several times today too. I thought he might want something more... like going somewhere, or wanting a specific item. If possible, I want to grant any wish Watarai has. Thinking that, I glanced at him beside me. He was staring intently at me, then raised the corners of his mouth in a smile.

"Would it be okay if I asked for more than that?"

"Eh?"

More than that? What does he mean?

Like a promise to go somewhere? Or something beyond holding hands

and hugging? Not understanding what he was asking for, I tried to imagine the most "advanced" thing I could think of, and heat rushed to my face all at once. I could feel the warmth spreading to my neck.

I didn't know how far Watarai was thinking, but I had to say something.

"If... if it's what Watarai wants, then... it's okay."

"……Eh?"

At my brain-to-mouth response, Watarai looked stunned, the word slipping out. He blinked a few times, and as he processed my words, his face rapidly turned scarlet. *If we both get embarrassed, this is hopeless.* His reaction made me even more embarrassed. Watarai awkwardly lowered his gaze to his feet and muttered softly.

"Um…… Not right away... taking it slow is fine."

"……Yeah."

So he *did* mean "that."

The sound of my pounding heart echoed throughout my entire body. I was already over capacity and could only manage a weak nod. Trying to cool my heated body, I took a breath of air. Just then, Mizunase, who was walking ahead, turned around *kuru*.

"Hey! Let's stop by the supermarket for a sec... What's up? Why the long faces?"

"「……Something like that.」"

Avoiding Mizunase's gaze, Watarai and I answered in unison. Mizunase muttered, "Hmm." *I can only pray he didn't hear our previous conversation.*

"Well, whatever. So, is it cool if we stop by the supermarket?"

"Why?"

"'Cause I still wanna eat a whole cake, so I'm gonna buy ingredients."

Saying that, Mizunase pointed at the supermarket sign visible a little further ahead. He'd already started walking that way while pointing, so we were going there regardless. I looked at Watarai; he nodded and said, "Sure," so we headed for the supermarket. The supermarket was

chilly inside, partly because it sold food. It was perfect for cooling down my overheated brain.

Chasing after Mizunase, who was forging ahead, I picked up a basket and placed it in the cart Watarai had brought. Then I gripped the cart's handle.

"I'll take over."

"Eh? It's fine, I can... Oh, you wanna push?"

"……Yeah."

"Haha! You're like Tsumugi. Cute."

Watarai smoothly ruffled my hair and let go of the handle, letting me take over. Ever since I was little, I always pushed the cart when shopping, so now it feels unsettling *not* to. *It's a childish whim for a high schooler.*

Listening to the pop-edited Christmas songs, I pushed the cart *goro goro* over to Mizunase. Recognizing the cart's arrival, Mizunase unceremoniously dumped the items he was holding into the basket. Cake sponges, whipping cream, chocolate sauce, and various toppings.

"By the way, Mizunase, how much money do you have?"

"Let's see... About 2000 yen?"

"You should probably check."

Hearing that, Mizunase took his wallet from his bag and started checking the contents. His movements were jerky, making the cake bag hooked on his arm swing worryingly. I reached out, took the cake bag from Mizunase's arm, and hung it on a hook on the cart. When I looked up, Mizunase, his eyes still fixed on his wallet, spoke.

"Ah, it's not 2000. 1200... Oh, but this is a receipt... 200 yen."

"Seriously? You can't even buy one thing."

"Hioki...! A lifelong favor!"

"...Keep it under 3000 yen, please."

"Thank you!"

Mizunase's face lit up *pa*, and he headed back towards the product shelves. *First Mizunase, now Tsujitani... Do they think they can get away with anything by saying 'a lifelong favor'?* Feeling exasperated with Mizunase, I also felt a pang of worry and checked my own wallet. Thankfully, there were three 1000-yen bills.

"I'll chip in if it's not enough."

"Nah, it's fine, you already bought me stuff earlier."

I accepted Watarai's sentiment but opened my phone's calculator app, checking the prices of the items in the basket as I calculated. Factoring in tax, it came to around 1500 yen. *It's coming out of my allowance, so I'd really prefer he stops around here.* I looked up from my phone to see Mizunase returning again.

"For strawberry shortcake, you gotta have strawberries, right! Oh, and I wanna eat hotcakes too, so I brought this."

"Uh-huh."

I half-listened to Mizunase as I continued calculating. The strawberries must be expensive, because we were getting close to the limit.

Thinking it was about time to wrap up, I looked up. Watarai was peering into the basket and muttering.

"Did we have milk at home?"

"Ah—... I'm not sure. I think we might have, but maybe we should buy a small one just in case."

I answered Watarai, then turned to Mizunase.

Mizunase nodded *kokun*, started to take a step, then spoke.

"You guys are like a married couple, huh."

"...Just go get it quickly."

"Yessir~."

I waved him off like shooing a fly. Mizunase walked off to get the milk. *Haah...* I covered my face, then glanced at Watarai. He was wearing a satisfied smile and peeking at me.

"You're not denying it."

"Should I give it to you? My last name."

"More than your last name, I'd be happy just to have you, Hioki."

"Tha... that so?"

How can I get the upper hand with Watarai? Even if I make a move like just now, I usually end up defeated, and he tops it, leaving me the flustered one. Trying to hide my heating-up body again, I looked down and started walking. Mizunase returned, carrying a small carton of milk.

"This much?"

"Yeah. Let's call it done."

"'K."

I took the milk carton from Mizunase, checked the price, entered it into the calculator app, and confirmed we'd avoided going over 3000 yen.

Putting the milk in the basket, we headed for the checkout counters and entered the self-checkout area.

"Ah, I'll scan everything."

"...Okay."

Mizunase fiddled with the tablet and started scanning the items. *He looks like he's having fun. Honestly, I wanted to do it too, but not enough to stubbornly insist.* I took a step back and watched Mizunase.

Then, Watarai, who was bagging the items Mizunase handed him, looked back at me. He tilted his head as if asking, "Did you want to do it?" I nodded silently, and he laughed, a suppressed sound deep in his throat. *He probably thinks I'm like Tsumugi-kun again.* Mizunase finished scanning all the items, operated the tablet to proceed with payment, received the change and receipt, and returned to us before we left the store. Crunching *zaku zaku* on the packed snow, I remembered something and spoke.

"Why didn't you ring the intercom when you went into the house earlier?"

"Ah, 'cause it was open."

"Ehh……?"

I was speechless at Mizunase's unexpected answer.

Isn't it bad for a place with that exterior to have such lousy security? Starting to feel worried about various things, Watarai added to Mizunase's words.

"Only the gate was open, the house itself was locked."

"Ahh... Good. Wait, but how did you get inside?"

"That was Horita who let us in."

Finally, the mystery was solved.

So Horita must have opened it when he went to the bathroom. Probably happened to pass by the entrance when it was noisy or something.

I should tell Ino about the gate. Thinking that, my phone vibrated with a new message. It seemed to be sent to the group of eight, as Watarai and Mizunase were also checking their phones.

The door's unlocked, so just come on in.

The sender was Ino.

Now the security is definitely too lax. What if a stranger comes in? Does he want a Home Alone situation? Ah, but he's not alone, so it'd be Home... Five? Quintet? Having confirmed the message, we looked at each other and quickened our pace slightly towards the Ino residence.

When we reached the Ino residence, the gate was indeed half-open, just as the conversation suggested. It might move once the snow melts.

We passed through the half-open gate, walked past the garden messed up from the snowball fight, and hurried inside. I closed the door behind us *batan*, locked it, and took off my shoes.

"Man, I'm super tired."

"I forgot I was even hungry."

"I know."

Soaking in a bit of fatigue, I opened the living room door to find it pitch black inside. I strained my eyes, trying to adjust to the sudden darkness.

BANG

"「？！」"

"Whoa!?"

The sudden loud noise made my heart jump, and I dropped the bags I was holding, landing on my rear end with a *dosa*.

Right on cue, the room lights flashed *pa* on. Squinting in the sudden brightness, I saw the other five appear from the side, holding party poppers and smiling.

"Surpri～ise!"

U-Unnecessary...!

Looking up at the five, I could only manage a wry smile.

"Hioki, nice reaction!"

"Yo! MVP～!"

While being inexplicably praised by Tsujitani and Ino, I tried to stand but felt something was off.

As everyone shuffled *zoro zoro* towards the table saying, "Let's eat～," Watarai, perhaps noticing I wasn't getting up, turned back.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah... M-my legs gave out."

I let out a dry laugh while slumped on the floor.

To my utter embarrassment, it seemed the shock had made my legs lose their strength. It was probably temporary and would pass soon.

I looked up to tell Watarai to go on ahead, but he was calling out to Nakazato, who was nearby, "Take this."

Now free of the bags, Watarai crouched in front of me and held out both arms.

"Come here."

"Eh, ah, seriously, it's fine."

"It's cold sitting there, isn't it?"

"It'll get better soon."

"Come on, hurry up."

Watarai shook his hands impatiently.

He probably won't take no for an answer. I started to reach out my arms but then realized something. Even if I let him carry me, that position...

"Um, not a princess carry. A piggyback or just dragging me would be fine."

"Princess carry is the easiest for putting you down on the sofa."

Saying that, and perhaps losing patience, Watarai pulled my arm and slid his hands under my back and knees. The so-called princess carry. It was my first time.

Watarai lifted me and started walking towards the sofa. At this point, I was beyond caring. I just looked up at him as I was carried.

"Aren't I heavy? You'll get sore muscles again, like at the beach."

"It's fine. I started working out since then."

"Eh, you were serious about that?"

"See? It came in handy."

Watarai looked down at me and grinned *nikko*. *He's just so cool, no matter what.* I nodded and lowered my gaze, just as we reached the sofa, where he gently set me down. Watarai let out a soft breath and held out a hand. *Guess I was a bit heavy after all.*

"Take off your jacket, I'll go hang it up."

"Ahh... I'm indebted to you for everything."

"What's with the samurai talk sometimes?"

I took off my jacket, handed it to him, and Watarai laughed as he walked towards the sunroom.

Watching his retreating back, I let all the strength leave my body and sank into the sofa. *I could fall asleep like this.*

"What would milady like to drink?"

"...Orange juice."

"Roge-er."

Just as I was about to close my eyes, Morisaki thrust an empty paper cup in front of me. I only moved my eyes, checked the lineup of large PET bottles, and answered. The nickname bothered me, but I'd lose if I acknowledged it.

Morisaki poured the orange juice and placed it on the table for me. Then, Horita called out.

"Milady, what pizza would you like?"

"Eh? Ah—... Tomato Basil..."

"Your wish is my command~"

Horita nodded, placed a slice of tomato basil pizza on a plate, and set it before me. *This is a bad trend.* Sure enough, next it was Nakazato's turn.

"Milady, is two pieces of chicken okay?"

"Yeah, whatever's fine."

" 'K~"

Nakazato said that, used kitchen tongs to pick up the chicken, and placed it next to the pizza. Watching this, Tsujitani sat down next to me, a tablet in his hand.

"Now, milady! Please choose your favorite song!"

"Favorite song..."

Taking the offered tablet, I peered at the screen, which showed playlists from various genres. *Anything's fine. Christmas songs are the standard, right? Personally, I prefer Western Christmas songs.*

I typed into the search bar and tapped the first result that appeared. Music started playing from the TV speaker placed next to the large TV.

Suddenly, everyone turned to look at me in unison. Wondering if I'd done something wrong, I tilted my head anxiously.

"Eh, wh-what?"

"Milady, that's not a Christmas song, it's a birthday song."

Listening to the music at Mizunase's words, I realized it wasn't the Christmas song I'd imagined, but a birthday song. Looking at the search bar on the tablet, it read Birthday Song.

".....My mistake."

"Geez! Milady! You're so scatterbrained!"

Ino, who had come over and sat opposite me, ruffled my head *washawasha* as I looked at the tablet. I stopped the song and started a proper Christmas one. I shoved the tablet back at Tsujitani, peeled Ino off me, and slumped *zuru zuru* against the sofa.

Staring blankly at the vaulted ceiling, I noticed Tsujitani had gotten up to put the tablet away. Watarai took the vacant spot next to me and started smoothing my disheveled hair.

"You're cute, milady."

"Hmmm....."

Giving a noncommittal reply, I sat there letting Watarai do as he pleased. Then Ino stood up, holding a paper cup.

"Okay, everyone, please grab your drinks~!"

At Ino's words, everyone picked up their paper cups, stood up, and formed a circle. *Good, my legs are working again.*

Ino, confirming everyone had their cups, raised his voice.

"Alright! Here we go! On three, Merry?"

'Christmas~!'

Eight paper cups clinked together.

I drank down the orange juice and sat back on the sofa. *Come to think of it, I haven't washed my hands.* I was wiping my hands with a wet wipe when Tsujitani started speaking with a solemn expression.

"Well, how about a Christmas-like topic..."

Everyone munched on their food while focusing on Tsujitani, who continued with a serious face.

"It's about how to become handsome."

That has nothing to do with Christmas!

In the end, Tsujitani's sincere concern was shattered by Morisaki's words: "Let's be honest, it's genetics or luck."

"How long do I have to whip this for?"

"Until it forms stiff peaks."

Mizunase asked while mixing the whipping cream in a bowl, and Watarai peered over, giving rough advice.

I took the chocolate sauce from the bag, opened the cap, and tried to squeeze it over the muffin I'd bought. But no matter how hard I squeezed, the chocolate wouldn't come out. *Maybe it's clogged?* I shook it up and down and tried squeezing again. But my arm just trembled *purupuru*, and the contents still didn't emerge.

"Are you okay?"

"The chocolate won't come out."

Watarai called out to me while rolling up my sleeve, so I stopped and looked up at him. After finishing rolling up my sleeve, Watarai took the chocolate sauce from me, pointed it down, and tried squeezing, but it still didn't come out. *Should you keep it upside down or something?*

As I was thinking of ways to squeeze it out, Watarai unscrewed the cap itself and checked something.

"You just didn't take off the inner seal."

"Eh? Ah, you're right."

Watarai peeled off the inner foil seal, screwed the cap back on, and handed it to me. Our eyes met, and I felt laughter bubbling up. *What was that whole struggle with the chocolate sauce about?*

Taking the sauce back from Watarai, I turned back to the muffin. But when I tried to squeeze, I was laughing too hard to apply any force.

"Kuh... Haha... All my effort... Ahaha!"

"...Stop laughing and just put it on already."

Watarai said, also struggling to hold back his laughter, which made it worse. I took a deep breath and tried squeezing again, but only a tiny trickle came out. The meager amount was itself funny.

"Pfft... Haha! Ah—... Kuku... I can't do this."

"...I'll do the next one, give it here."

Saying that, Watarai held out his hand, so I passed him the chocolate sauce. Watarai also took a breath and squeezed. This time, the chocolate shot out *byu*, but it combined with the little I'd already put on, creating a pattern that looked like a displeased emoticon.

We looked at each other in silence, then burst out laughing again.

"Hic... Ahaha! It's, it's tot... Pfft, totally... a frowny face!"

"Kuh... Haha! Don't make me laugh...!"

Ah—, my stomach hurts.

As we both doubled over laughing, Horita, who was cutting strawberries, caught our laughter and called over.

"What's so funny?"

"Ah, ...kuku... It's one of those 'you had to be there' things."

"Ah, got it."

Horita nodded and went back to cutting strawberries.

Sorry we can't share it. Feeling a strange sense of guilt, I started applying the chocolate sauce again. Once you get past the peak of something like this, it's usually fine. Once I'd applied enough to satisfy me, Mizunase called out right on time.

"Hey, about this much?"

"Yeah. I think it's good."

Watarai, who perhaps hadn't fully recovered from the laughter, answered while wiping the corner of his eye. Mizunase put down the

whisk and picked up a spatula. With a serious expression, he began spreading the cream on the sponge cake. *He's probably more focused than during a club match.*

Watching Mizunase spread the cream, I wondered if they had *that thing* and called out to Ino in the living room.

"Ino—, is it okay to look through the kitchen stuff?"

"Permission granted—"

"Thanks—"

Hearing Ino's reply, I went back to the kitchen and started searching the cupboards for a certain tool.

After checking the lower ones, I opened the upper cupboards. I spotted what I was looking for on the very top shelf, but I couldn't quite reach it. I was about to get a chair when Watarai reached up and called out.

"This?"

"Yeah, that's it. Thanks."

I took the item from Watarai and placed it in front of Mizunase. Mizunase looked up from the cake and went "Ooh."

A rotating cake stand. Exactly the kind of tool a patissier would use. Mizunase placed the plate on it, spun it, and started spreading the cream quite professionally. Watarai and Horita also voiced their admiration.

Once Mizunase was mostly done, Horita took over, smoothing out the uneven parts as he spun the stand. He was really skilled, maybe naturally dexterous.

Finally, they topped it with strawberries and the leftover whipped cream, sticking Santa and reindeer candles on top. A spontaneous round of applause broke out.

"You could open a shop!"

"We've got this, we've got this."

"We're geniuses."

Horita, Watarai, and Mizunase took pictures with their phones, then loaded the cake onto the cart and wheeled it into the living room.

I brought the muffins and the three individual cakes along, and we all sat back on the sofa, surrounding the handmade whole cake.

"Whoa, amazing."

"It looks real."

"It *is* real."

"Let's turn off the lights."

The other four also praised the handmade cake. We lit the candles and turned off the lights. The flickering flames faintly illuminated the room.

"Now *this* feels like a birthday atmosphere."

"Anyone here have a December birthday?"

Ino and Tsujitani spoke up, and everyone shook their heads, saying "No." Apparently, no one had a December birthday.

"What about November or January? Tsujitani, you're January, right?"

"Yep."

Mizunase called out, and Tsujitani confirmed.

"November is Morisaki, right?"

"Yeah... well."

At Nakazato's words, Morisaki answered modestly.

He's probably embarrassed about being celebrated.

It turned into a celebration for the two with birthdays closest, and they started singing the birthday song.

"Happy birthday dear... What's Morisaki's given name?"

"It's Naoya. Tsujitani, yours?"

"Mine is Raiku."

Maybe because it was the first time hearing them, or they were unusual, or just not what they expected, Morisaki, Nakazato, and Watarai looked surprised. As if to bridge the paused song, Ino and Mizunase started clapping and singing again.

"「Happy birthday dear Raiku and Naoya~! Happy birthday to you!」"

As they finished the song, the candle flames were blown out, and party poppers went off *paan*. Ino turned the lights on with the remote, and the room filled with applause. Watching Watarai and Horita portion out the cake, Nakazato spoke.

"Tsujitani Raiku... sounds strong somehow. Ino and Mizunase, what are your given names?"

"I'm Shunsuke, and Mizunase is Aoi."

Shunsuke and Aoi.

When Ino answered, voices went "Heh~." Since we usually call each other by our last names, it felt like the first time I'd heard their given names in a while. Following that trend, all my friends except me ended up sharing their given names. *It feels strange to learn everyone's given names about two months after becoming close.* I watched my friends introducing themselves while stuffing my face with cake. The handmade cake was incredibly delicious.

"Thanks for today~!"

"Let's hang out again during winter break."

"Send your free days to the group."

"Make sure to lock the door properly."

"Send the photos we took today too."

"Thanks for having us—!"

"Please give our regards to your grandparents."

We called out to Ino as we left through the entrance.

It was completely dark outside, and both the darkness and the cold had intensified, so we didn't linger long before leaving the Ino residence. Tsujitani lived in a different direction, so we parted ways

there.

The sunlight from the daytime hadn't been enough to melt all the snow; plenty still remained. We walked towards the station, crunching *zaku zaku* on the now partially frozen snow, talking about things like until what age you get Christmas presents, or until what age you get New Year's money. We ended on the topic of becoming third-year students next year and soon reached the station.

I wasn't taking the train, so I half-listened to the five's conversation.

"Well, see ya."

"Later."

"Don't catch a cold."

"Ah, wait, isn't that the boarding announcement?"

"Thanks for treating us to cake."

It seemed their train was about to depart. Everyone except Watarai passed through the ticket gate and ran for the platform. I saw the five off and glanced at the person beside me.

"Watarai, are you *sure* you're not going the same way as them?"

"...I am, but I just wanted to stay with you a little longer. Is that... unwelcome?"

"It's not unwelcome."

My cheeks relaxed into a smile. Watarai looked relieved and smiled back. Near the slightly underwhelming, far-from-metropolitan illuminations, Watarai took something out of his bag and took my hand.

"It's late, but... Happy Birthday, Hioki."

"Thank you."

Watarai placed a small box in my hand and smiled *nikko*. But at that moment, I had a slightly bad feeling.

"Can I open it?"

"Sure, but no returns."

See, I knew it.

I carefully unwrapped the packaging and opened the box. Inside was a wristwatch.

"Eh?"

Honestly, I'd expected a necklace or pair rings, so I was surprised. The design was simple, something I could probably wear to school.

"Was it different from what you imagined?"

"Ah... Now that you mention it, yes, but it's not that I dislike it or anything."

"Okay."

"Is there a reason you chose a watch?"

I looked at the watch once more, then raised my face. Watarai nodded, still smiling.

"No deep meaning, really. I just thought it would be easy to wear."

"Ahh... I see."

"Of course, I thought about various accessories, but you can't wear those to school."

"The grade-level director would confiscate them."

"And also, seeing you wear it would give me a sense of satisfaction."

"...Okay."

Maybe that was the real goal all along.

I carefully closed the box, rewrapped it, and carefully placed it in my bag. Just then, a cold wind blew *byu*. I sniffled from the cold and spoke to Watarai.

"We should probably head back soon, it's cold."

"Yeah. I don't want this to end, but..."

"Well, see you later."

"Yeah... See you."

Watarai straightened my bangs, kissed my forehead, gave a soft smile, and then started walking towards the platform.

".....Eh?"

What just happened?

It was so natural I didn't even have the presence of mind to wave goodbye to Watarai; I just stood there frozen for a while.

Slowly raising my arm, I pressed my palm against the spot on my forehead he'd touched. I felt a gradual warmth spreading throughout my entire body.

"Haha."

I couldn't help but laugh.

I might never be able to beat Watarai.

I think Watarai's very existence in my life is the greatest gift I could ever receive.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

its time to say goodbye to our beloved Watarai and Hioki

there is a part two of the novel where they are boyfriends, but im not sure if I'll continue

translating it

please leave your comments and don't forget to follow my socials.

tiktok - ballmageddon

insta - scisorsistaah

Time has a way of slipping through your fingers. Before I knew it, we were on the verge of our third spring.

"Excuse me."

I slowly opened the staff room door and stepped inside. The familiar scent of coffee tickled my nose, as always. My homeroom teacher didn't seem to be there. The only things on his desk were neatly organized documents and the class photo from our school trip.

"Thanks for bringing the journal."

"Wha—?! …Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to yell."

I'd been so distracted by the photo that I hadn't noticed someone approaching from behind. My voice had been way too loud for the staff room. Even with the post-ceremony chatter, I was sure it had echoed.

I turned around and met my teacher's gaze, his eyebrows lowered in an apologetic look.

"Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"No, it's my fault for being so jumpy."

I let out a dry laugh, and a brief silence fell between us. The buzz of surrounding conversations reached my ears.

This is… awkward.

"Ah, I was just here to drop off the journal…" I said rapidly, plopping the journal onto the desk with a soft *thud*. The motion made the framed photo on the desk tip over with a *clatter*. Seems the hefty journal had created a mini gust of wind.

"Ah… Sorry about that."

"It's fine, it's fine. It didn't break."

Feeling increasingly flustered by how nothing was going smoothly, I set the frame upright. As I did, the photo inside caught my eye again.

"Will you be here next year, Sensei?"

The small talk spilled out without me planning it. I stared at the photo, waiting for his reply, but the pause felt odd, so I glanced up. He wore the same apologetic, downturned-eyebrow smile as before.

"I suppose that's a surprise for next month."

"...I see. Well… thank you for everything this past year."

It was just a feeling, a pure gut instinct, but I sensed he was probably being transferred. I bowed my head, pouring a year's worth of gratitude into the gesture. For some reason, my teacher responded with a sigh.

Huh? Did I leave a bad impression? My report card had been nothing but praise. As I stood there puzzling over it, he gave an exaggerated shrug.

"Honestly, I was on pins and needles about how your school trip group would turn out."

"...About that, well, my apologies."

I bowed again, and he smiled. "I'm kidding," he said, giving my back a light *thump*. He then picked up the journal I'd just delivered and began flipping through the pages, as if reminiscing.

"Did you have a good time with this class?"

"Yes. I made more friends."

"That'd be Watarai-kun and the others, right? You guys get along great."

"Yeah, I'd say so. We even hang out on weekends."

"I see… You know, high school friends… some stay in touch as adults, some don't—"

He looked up from the journal, a soft smile gracing his lips.

"But somehow, I get the feeling you guys will stay close from here on out."

My homeroom teacher for my second year. A teacher for just a single year. That was all. And yet, his words carried a strangely certain weight.

"That's the plan," I said, returning his smile with one of my own. I bowed one last time and left the staff room.

The echo of my footsteps was the only sound in the quiet, student-less hallway. The afternoon sun must have grown stronger; everything felt unusually bright.

'But somehow, I get the feeling you guys will stay close from here on out.'

My teacher's words echoed in my mind.

It was a selfish wish, but I wanted that to be true. I wanted to make it true. Tsujiya and Ino, who'd been with me since junior high. Minase, who I met through the club. Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki, who I grew closer to after the school trip. And Watarai, who had become someone special to me.

As I placed my hand on the stairway railing, the watch on my wrist glittered. The watch Watarai had given me for Christmas.

I bounded up the stairs and quickly stepped into Class 5's classroom.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The classroom was empty, save for Watarai, who had waited for me. He looked up from his phone and grinned.

"Welcome back."

"I'm back."

I smiled back and headed to the desk in front of his. My own desk, obviously. As I tidied the scattered pens and pencils on the desk, I glanced at Watarai, who was watching my hands.

"Do you think Sensei will still be here next year?"

"*Our* sensei?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm… I wonder."

Watarai sounded disinterested, muttering the words before resting his cheek in his hand. Though his distant demeanor bothered me a little, I tossed my stationery into my backpack and pulled out my chair.

"Not the type to care about that stuff?"

"Mmm… I'm more concerned about the third-year class assignments."

"Ah… yeah, you're right."

So that's why he seemed distracted. I gave a understanding smile to Watarai, who looked anxious.

"Even if we're in different classes, my feelings won't change."

"Well, *I'm* not going to let them change, either."

Watarai said this with a proud smirk, then took my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. The tickling sensation made me smile. A soft "Hey," reached my ear.

"Will you listen to my request?"

"That depends, but sure."

"Are you free during spring break? I want to see you as much as possible."

"Eh…"

What, is that all? Not that I could say that—it would be rude—but his

request was so simple I couldn't help the sound of surprise that escaped me.

Seeing my confused reaction, Watarai's eyebrows dipped, and he spoke apologetically.

"Do you have plans?"

"Ah, no, it's not that. It's just not really something you need to 'request'…"

"So that's a yes?"

"Of course."

I nodded repeatedly. Watarai's face broke into a happy smile.

"Is it okay if it's a bit far?"

"Where are we going?"

"Like… Tokyo?"

"Whoa…"

"Is that a no?"

"No, no! I was just surprised it was farther than I thought. It's totally fine."

"Great. Thanks."

He smiled again and started operating his phone with one hand. Probably looking up the account or homepage of a place he wanted to go.

While he was focused on his phone, I gently stroked the hand that was holding mine. Watarai twitched his fingers, looked up, and let out a small laugh.

"Telling me to hurry up and show you?"

"No, just killing time."

"Just wait a little longer."

He bowed his head again, eyes on his phone.

While I waited, I looked out the window at the vibrant green outside. *This is the last time I'll see this view from here,* I found myself thinking, getting sentimental. A gentle spring breeze rustled through the window. The warm wind, carrying scattered cherry blossom petals, softly brushed through my hair.

I turned my gaze from the window back to Watarai, who was still looking down.

"We're taking the train, right?"

"Yeah. I can't drive yet."

"If you had your license, maybe we'd go by car."

"But if we had a car, our destination might be different."

"Just going for a drive sounds fun too."

"Ah—, that does sound good. Let's go for one once we get our licenses."

"I bet you'd be a good driver, Watarai."

"Eh? But I'm bad at kart games?"

"Ah… right. I'll be sure to wear a helmet when I ride with you."

"Haha! It's not *that* bad!"

"Hey… you wanna go out with me?"

It felt like a natural continuation of our conversation. There was no build-up, no tension, nothing. And yet, for some reason, the words just tumbled out. Watarai slowly raised his downcast eyelids, blinking in surprise.

"Go out…? Where?"

"Not that kind of 'go out.' I mean, will you be my girlfriend? Boyfriend? My partner."

"Ah… that kind……."

He'd responded, but he didn't seem to have processed it yet. Watarai stopped fiddling with his phone and just stared at me, frozen solid.

Another warm spring breeze passed between us.

The gentle wind filled the empty classroom.

"You're not joking… right?"

"I'm not joking."

"You and me, Hioki...? Right?"

"Yeah."

"Really…"

"Uh-huh."

"I-I see……"

Beneath his bangs, swaying in the spring breeze, his clear eyes wavered.

"Should I wait for an answer?"

"Ah, no…"

He said this, blinked once more, and then suddenly ducked his head.

"……I'm sorry."

"……"

Slowly, only time seemed to move.

I could hear it all—the sound of cars driving in the suburbs, the chirping of birds, the rustle of the wind.

Pulling my consciousness back from the surrounding sounds, I looked at Watarai, but his face was still hidden.

"Ah… I got shot down," I said, forcing a laugh.

Watarai's face snapped up vigorously.

"Th-That's not it! I didn't refuse you…"

As he trailed off, a single streak of light traced a path down Watarai's cheek. That was the starting pistol. One after another, tears began to wet his cheeks. First the sleeping face I saw on the bus, and now his

crying face—he's surprisingly childlike, isn't he? I let out a soft laugh at the sight of him, his nose and cheeks stained red, his mouth twisted into a upside-down U. I let go of his hand and wiped his tears away.

"Can I take this as happy tears?"

"...They're mixed with embarrassment and feeling pathetic."

"Why?"

"...Isn't this just incredibly uncool?"

Watarai sniffled hard, then yanked the hem of his uniform to wipe his tears away roughly. I think he'd probably intended to be the one to confess again. He'd said as much after he first told me his feelings.

But, just like when Ryo-san taught me, he must have completely forgotten. Given how we usually act, we're practically a couple already. It's no wonder.

"Let me have my cool moment every once in a while, too," I said, smiling at him as he continued to cry.

But he just wiped his eyes and furrowed his brow. I couldn't tell if he was dissatisfied or just trying to stop himself from crying any more.

"Really… are you sure it's me?"

My reflection swam in his eyes, veiled by a film of tears. After pursuing me so relentlessly, after letting me have my way, to offer me a choice at the very last moment… Watarai was both kind and a little cruel.

"Yes. I want Watarai. If it's not Watarai, I don't want anyone."

Now, and from now on.

As I slowly spun my words, Watarai gave me a soft, gentle smile. Then, he let out a sigh of relief and leaned back against his chair, as if a weight had been lifted.

"……"

So confessing is this mentally and physically exhausting? I had it easier because I already knew how he felt, but Watarai bared his heart without knowing mine at all. He's amazing. I took a deep breath, as if changing the air in my body, and slumped forward onto the desk. The

cool surface felt good against my warm cheek.

"You're strong, Watarai."

"...Why?"

"Weren't you scared? When you confessed to me at the beach?"

"Ah… I was probably half-desperate. I thought you'd hate me."

His voice sounded lonely. I straightened up to look at him, but he was gazing out the window, still leaned back in his chair.

Keeping his eyes outside, he spoke.

"Hioki… your preference wasn't originally for guys, right?"

"Yeah… Was yours?"

"No, mine wasn't either."

He paused, then turned his face to look straight at me, his eyebrows furrowing in a troubled expression.

"Because it was different, it was scary. …But, there's no 'right answer' for who you fall for. I had no choice but to believe in myself."

Two guys together.

While there are movements in society calling for understanding of homosexuality, it's still not what you'd call mainstream.

I always thought Watarai was skilled and handled everything effortlessly, but he must have struggled and borne a lot of worries I couldn't see. Honestly, it's hard for me to fully understand all of that hardship. Watarai had his struggles, and I had mine. But now, I'm nothing but grateful to Watarai for taking that step and telling me how he felt.

"Thank you. For putting it into words."

"Though, I'll admit it was kinda sketchy when I started looking up brainwashing methods midway through."

"……Huh? What?"

"Haha, just kidding, kidding!"

He really didn't need to say that part out loud. I decided to pretend I hadn't heard it. I laughed in return, then stood up to stretch my stiff body. My back or hip made a *crack*ing sound.

Checking my phone, I saw nearly thirty minutes had already passed.

"We should probably get going."

"Wait, is my face still red?"

"Nah. Your eyes are a little puffy, though."

"...Seriously?"

While Watarai checked his reflection on his phone screen, I started locking the windows. Down in the bike parking area, I could see a few students still milling about. After finishing the locks, I returned to my seat and slung my backpack over my shoulder. That's when I suddenly remembered something.

"Speaking of which, you might have forgotten, but…"

"Hm?"

"During the school trip, we drew those fortune slips, right?"

"Yeah."

"On your slip, the love fortune part said, 'You should believe in yourself and move forward,' didn't it?"

"Ah, you remember that well."

"It came true, huh."

I smiled proudly as I shouldered my backpack.

Watarai looked stunned for a moment, then laughed. "Yeah, I guess it did."

"What did yours say?"

"Ah, what was it? But I think it wasn't really relevant for me in the end."

"I see… Oh."

Watarai stopped as if he'd just remembered something. I turned back, wondering if he'd forgotten something.

Tilting my head, Watarai spoke with an embarrassed look.

"I never gave you an answer, did I?"

"An answer…? Ah, to the confession."

"Yeah."

Now that he mentioned it, he was right. I had already assumed I knew the answer without hearing it.

The air grew tense again. I swallowed hard.

"Looking forward to it."

"Me too."

"Can I hug you?"

"G-Go ahead."

Awkwardly, I spread my arms. Watarai smiled happily and hugged me, backpack and all. Since I had little in my bag, I was pretty much flattened against him, but I hoped it wasn't too uncomfortable to hug. *Ah, well, whatever.* I could faintly feel Watarai's body heat and the sound of his heartbeat. It was comforting. I let out a small sigh and buried my forehead into the curve of his shoulder. We stayed like that until we were both satisfied, then slowly pulled apart. Seeing his utterly pleased smile made my own cheeks relax in response.

"You don't need permission from now on, you know."

"……Eh?"

"Ah—… well, we're dating now."

"Because we're boyfriends, I can do as I please?"

"B-boy… well, yeah. Yeah."

The word "boyfriends" finally, *finally*, started to sink in, making the back of my neck grow warm with a delayed reaction. I could feel the heat spreading all the way to my ears. I averted my gaze from Watarai and hid my face by burying it in his shoulder with a soft *thud*. *Let me*

do this. I'm your boyfriend now. I'd stay like this until the embarrassment faded. Watarai accepted my weight and gently stroked my head.

"Getting shy?"

"……Yeah."

"Haha, cute."

I'd prefer to be a cool boyfriend, but… that might be impossible right now. As I took a deep breath to calm myself, I heard Watarai's voice call my name from above.

"Hioki."

That was all. No other words followed.

Not understanding his intention, I looked up—and something soft touched my lips.

"Eh."

I had no idea what had just happened. All I could do was stare at Watarai's satisfied face with a dumbfounded expression.

I brought my hand to my own lips, tracing them with my finger as if chasing the lingering sensation.

"Let's get used to this, too."

"Ah… yes."

My brain still lagging, I managed a reply.

It had happened in an instant, leaving my mind completely blank. How long did it take for me to realize I'd been kissed? Staring vacantly at Watarai, my hand still over my lips, I finally squeezed out a sound.

"D-dry…"

"Feedback? On the kiss?"

"No… My, my lips… were they okay?"

"Eh? They were totally fine."

"That's… good…"

I'm such an idiot.

I'd blurted out the first thing that came to mind to fill the silence, and it was so stupid it shocked even me. But what are you supposed to say after being kissed anyway? As my thoughts spiraled, Watarai in front of me started laughing, his shoulders shaking.

"Ahaha! Sorry. You were really surprised, huh?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm just… not used to it."

"It's fine. I'd be upset if you *were* used to it."

Saying that, he narrowed his eyes slightly.

Phew, that was close. If I'd been experienced, an intense interrogation would have surely begun.

Not that I'm one to talk, but I'd heard Watarai had a girlfriend before. For him, kissing might be as casual as a greeting.

"You're okay with a kiss, but the word 'boyfriend' makes you shy?"

"Eh… Ah, you're right. But it's that delayed reaction thing. I'll probably be dying of embarrassment once I get home."

"Heh… Wanna come to my place today?"

"No, I'm good. Give me a pass for today."

"So today is a 'no'? Does that mean any day *except* today is fine?"

"Ah, …yeah."

Can someone please sew my mouth shut?

I was at a loss for words, watching myself dig a deeper hole with every sentence. Then, the familiar school chime rang. In a way, it was my savior. *Thank you, chime.* As if propelled by the sound, we stepped out of the classroom and began walking down the brightly lit hallway together.

"I noticed something when you hugged me earlier," I said, our two sets of footsteps echoing as I spoke to Watarai walking beside me.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. He tilted his head curiously.

"What?"

"Probably… no, definitely. You grew taller, didn't you?"

"Eh, me?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I might have grown a bit, but how could you tell?"

"Somehow, when I looked up at you, you felt a little farther away than before."

Stopping, I looked down at Watarai from one step above him. *So this is how I look from Watarai's perspective? Maybe a little taller?* As I stood on my toes to adjust my height, Watarai started chuckling.

"It feels kinda weird for you to be bigger than me."

"Eh, why? Personally, I'd like us to be about the same."

"I prefer it when you look up at me with those upturned eyes."

"…Is there even a demand for a guy's upturned eyes?"

"There is. Because he's my *boyfriend*."

Watarai smirked, a mischievous grin spreading across his face, then started descending the remaining stairs toward the entrance.

The "boyfriend filter" is really something else, huh.

Following his cheerful-looking back, I heard loud voices coming from the shoe lockers.

"Ah—! Finally, you're here!"

"Hey, you're so slow!"

"I'm seriously gonna die of hunger here!"

In front of the second-year lockers, my three club friends were beckoning us impatiently. Next to them were Nakazato, Horita, and Morisaki too. I thought they'd already left… why were they still here?

As I changed my shoes, Tsujiya let out an exasperated sigh, probably noticing my confused look.

"Hey, don't tell me you forgot?"

"…Sorry, what was it?"

"Ugh~, seriously! We said we'd go for conveyor belt sushi after school today!"

At my response, Ino was the next to sigh.

Sushi… Did we talk about that? I don't remember…

As I packed my indoor shoes into my backpack, I tried to recall the day. But the only thing that came to mind was what had just happened with Watarai. I looked to Minase for an explanation. His earlier boisterousness gone, he spoke hesitantly.

"W-well, we *did* say it, I guess…"

"When?"

"Um… this morning."

"Morning?"

"You come by bike, right, Hioki?"

"Yeah."

When I nodded, Minase muttered without changing his expression.

"When you were parking your bike at the racks, we all yelled from the classroom."

"Huh?"

"One character each. Tsujiya did 'Su', Ino did 'shi', I did 'Go', and all together for '—"

"Wait, I don't care about the role assignments!"

What are they talking about?

There's no way I could have heard that! How much do these guys overestimate my hearing?! As I stood there stunned by my friends'

bizarre behavior, I felt a quick tug on my arm.

"Ah, whatevs. Let's just go now."

Watarai, having finished changing his shoes, took my hand and smiled.

"Let's get going then~"

"Oh, right, I have my bike too. Should we meet at the station?"

"Let's do a double ride!"

Taking Watarai's expression as agreement, Tsujiya and the others began shuffling outside. My club friends, who seemed unable to bear their hunger, started walking at a slightly quicker pace. Then, I heard a sigh-laden voice from beside me.

"Whatever, but think about your limits, will you?"

Morisaki looked at me and Watarai, then shifted his gaze downward, glancing at our joined hands.

I followed Morisaki's line of sight and looked at my hand linked with Watarai's. We'd held hands in front of everyone plenty of times before. But there had always been a reason. Because I wasn't wearing my glasses, or because I'd accidentally drunk alcohol… *Ah, right. As lovers, we don't need a reason to touch.*

The thought made me smile naturally, even though it was out of place. I hurriedly covered my mouth with my free hand, but it seemed impossible to stop. I peeked at Watarai next to me, and our eyes met with a snap.

"What do we do?"

"Hm?"

"I think I'm feeling really giddy right now."

I smiled, my eyebrows dipping. Watarai looked puzzled for a moment before his face broke into a happy grin.

"Me too."

So this is what happiness feels like.

I let my hand fall from my mouth and smiled, my facial muscles completely relaxed. Then, as Watarai pulled my arm to take a step forward—or rather, just as he was about to— my backpack was yanked back hard.

"O—i! Stop, stop! I can't take any more of this!"

"Don't forget we're here too! The atmosphere is so sweet I'm gonna puke!"

I was restrained by Nakazato, and Watarai was held back by Horita. I looked at the newly created distance between Watarai and me, then turned just my head to see Nakazato behind me, his expression clouded as he shook his head.

"We'd prefer it if you kept that stuff for when we're not around."

"…Sorry. I completely forgot anyone but Watarai existed."

"Hey, hey. Don't go flaunting your love like it's breathing."

He let out a thoroughly exasperated sigh and released me. He'd only touched my backpack, probably to be considerate. *Nakazato is kind, in his own way.*

"But, that's just how it is," Watarai muttered under his breath as he freed himself from Horita and straightened up.

"Of course, I know there are limits. But I don't plan on changing how I act toward Hioki, or how I act toward you guys. If you hate it, then, well…"

"Like, dude. That's our line."

Morisaki cut off Watarai, who was struggling for words. Watarai and I stared at Morisaki with surprised faces, and he scowled lazily back at us.

"*I* don't plan on changing how I act toward you guys either. I mean, if I hated it, I'd have put some distance between us way before now."

Saying this—in contrast to his words—he gave a soft smile and started walking again. I was puzzled by Morisaki's expression, which looked as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, when someone patted me on the back.

"Even though he says that, Morisaki was the most worried about it."

"I kinda enjoyed it, though. I was like, 'I wonder what they're gonna show off next~?'"

Horita and Nakazato smiled at us, who were still standing still, and fell into step beside Morisaki.

Watarai and I looked at each other and laughed, the tension draining from us. With lighter steps, we walked over and joined the other three.

"So, how many plates are you gonna eat?"

"This table is gonna be a disaster zone."

"Speaking of which, I don't remember how much money I have in my wallet."

"Before that, can we go renew our train passes?"

"I should probably text my parents, too."

Talking about the same mundane things as always, we headed for the school gate. In the distance, I could hear the voices of Tsujiya, Ino, and Minase.

Looking around me, I saw my friends laughing and having fun. Looking up beside me, I saw my lover smiling gently at me. High school life is just a small part of a person's life, but the days I spent this year were deeply etched into my heart.

And above all, the school trip that became the catalyst for everything became a special memory for me.

Feeling the spring breeze on my skin, I gently squeezed Watarai's hand. Wishing with all my heart that this warmth would never leave my side.

-End-

Chapter 11: WATARAI'S POV PT1

Chapter Notes

Watarai is ALREADY posessive with his thoughts about Hioki on finding him first and

trying to make him a friend first, overall very CUTE

Appearance.

Personality.

Everything…

I wish I were just ordinary.

“Hey, did you see? Class 5 this year is insane.”

“Who the hell decided those groups?”

The day of the class announcement is always lively, but this year, it felt unusually noisy. I had purposely adjusted my arrival time to avoid the morning crowd, yet the hallway was still packed with students who showed no sign of leaving. I sighed. Maybe I could just check my class and attendance number later when things calmed down.

Still, I didn’t feel like pushing through the crowd just to see the class list. As I stood watching the sea of students shifting around, an old classmate suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

He looked excited—grabbed my arm the moment he saw me.

“H–hey…”

“Dude, this year’s lineup is wild.”

“What do you mean, wild?”

“Oh, by the way, you’re in Class 5!”

That was all he said before walking off in a hurry.

In the end, I had no idea what he was so worked up about—or what was supposedly “wild.”

Well, at least I knew my class now. Good enough.

Turning away from the noisy crowd, I headed toward the entrance hall. There, I noticed a small group of girls gathered near the doorway.

“...Hey, that’s Watarai, right?”

“...Seriously? The one from Class 5?”

“...Yeah, and apparently he’s in our class.”

“...Though personally, I think—”

If you’re going to gossip, at least do it where people can’t hear you. They whispered among themselves, giggling and sneaking glances at me as I walked past. Pretending not to notice, I headed to the shoe lockers for Class 5. The front area was crowded, but here it was a bit quieter.

“Ah—are you in Class 5?”

While changing my shoes, a voice called from above. I looked up to see a teacher standing there.

“Yes… I am.”

“Perfect! Could you help carry some materials to your classroom?”

“Sure.”

“Actually, maybe you could help too?”

The teacher looked past me, and when I turned around, I saw another boy standing there. He looked vaguely familiar. When he stopped rubbing his sleepy eyes and looked up at me, I remembered—Nakazato, I think.

Blinking slowly as if processing what he’d just heard, Nakazato nodded and spoke.

“Yeah, sure. Do we take them to the staff room first?”

“Right. Oh, and I forgot to introduce myself—I’m your homeroom teacher for Class 5.”

After giving us directions to where the materials were, the teacher hurried off down the hall.

“There’s always so much stuff to hand out at the start of a new term,” Nakazato said. “Yeah, probably.”

“Should’ve brought a backpack.”

He spoke to me as if we were already friends, adjusting the tote bag on his shoulder and opening his locker with practiced ease.

As I watched, I realized I hadn’t even checked my attendance number yet—so I didn’t know which locker was mine.

“Hey, uh, did you take a photo of the class list?”

“Hm? Oh, for the numbers?”

“Yeah. I forgot to check mine.”

“Hold on.”

He closed his locker, pulled out his phone, and scrolled for a moment. I averted my eyes so as not to peek at his screen.

“Number 42.”

“Thanks… wait, you know my name?”

I slid my sneakers into locker number 42 and shut it with a click. When I turned around, Nakazato looked genuinely surprised.

“Know your name? Of course I do.”

“Well… guess that makes two of us.”

“You know mine too?”

“Yeah. You’re Nakazato, right?”

“Right! Bingo. You can just call me Nakazato, though—I’ll call you Watarai.”

“Sure. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here!”

Nakazato flashed me a bright, friendly smile, and I forced a small one in return as we headed toward the staff room.

It had been a while since I’d made a new friend, and my body tensed up without me realizing it. I wasn’t bad at socializing—but I wasn’t good at it either. Thankfully, Nakazato was the easygoing type.

After some small talk, we reached the staff room and looked for the materials we were told to carry.

Teachers bustled around, and we finally spotted the right desk.

“I’ll take this stack.”

“Thanks. Then I’ll grab these.”

I lifted a pile of heavy booklets while Nakazato picked up some papers. Together, we left the staff room.

The hallway was still crowded, probably from the students who’d just finished checking the class lists.

“It’s like an amusement park in here,” he joked, holding the papers. “Yeah. I don’t get what’s so exciting about class lists—oh, wait.”

“What?”

“Someone told me Class 5 was ‘crazy’ this year. Do you know what that’s about?”

“Crazy? Like… full of delinquents or something?”

“No idea.”

Apparently, he didn’t know either.

As I tilted my head in confusion, a cheerful “Morning!” came from behind us. Two boys walked up.

They waved to Nakazato. “Hey, man!”

Then they looked at me—and froze.

“...Wait, Watarai… right?”

“Huh? You guys know each other? From what—his face?”

The two of them glanced between us, looking confused. Nakazato gave me a quick sidelong look, then smiled again.

“We just became friends.”

“What? Why?!”

“What do you mean why? We’re in the same class.”

“The same class…?”

The two of them said in unison, then suddenly clapped their hands as if realizing something.

“Oh right! Class 5!”

“Whoa, seriously?! Two of the Four Kings have already met?!”

“What are you talking about?”

Nakazato asked, puzzled.

The two boys exchanged an awkward look before explaining.

“The ‘Four Kings’—that’s just what we call the four best-looking guys in our year.”

“Yeah, it’s you two, plus Hotta and Morisaki. Since all four of you ended up in Class 5, everyone’s freaking out.”

Hotta and Morisaki—names I’d heard before, of course. In a small school like this, faces like theirs stood out.

So that’s what the fuss was about… though I couldn’t say it made me feel any better.

As I looked down, feeling oddly unsettled, one of the boys panicked.

“Ah, wait—it’s not like we mean that in a weird way!”

“Yeah! It’s not an insult or anything!”

They spoke fast, glancing nervously around before hurrying off with a quick “Later!” Watching them go, I noticed a few students sneaking glances at us. But whenever our eyes met, they quickly looked away.

“Sorry… I don’t think they meant anything bad,” Nakazato said. “You don’t have to apologize for them.”

He looked sheepish, so I shook my head and adjusted the booklets in my arms. After walking for a bit in silence, I finally asked:

“Do I… give off a bad impression?”

“Huh? No! Not at all.”

But his expression said otherwise.

Frowning slightly in thought, he finally looked up at me again with those big eyes.

“Would you get mad if I told you the truth?”

“Depends what it is.”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t.”

“Now I *really* want to know.”

He turned forward, clearly embarrassed to say it to my face.

“Well… you’re kind of *too* good-looking.”

“…What?”

“Wait, I’m not done.”

“…Go on.”

“It’s like how beautiful people’s serious faces can seem intimidating. You just look… hard to approach, I guess.”

“I see.”

“I’m not saying you should smile more or anything.”

He laughed, carefree as ever.

For some reason, that laugh had a calming effect—it melted away tension. Maybe it was his naturally friendly aura that made him so easy to be around.

“You’re really easy to talk to, Nakazato.”

“Well, it just makes life simpler, you know?”

“Maybe I should try to learn from you.”

“Go ahead.”

Laughing along with Nakazato’s cheerful chuckle, I realized we’d already arrived in front of Class 5’s room.

Maybe because there was still time before homeroom, students were scattered across the hallways and inside classrooms.

The moment we stepped into the room together, chatter rippled through the air.

“Wait, are they close too?”

“They’re not from the same middle school, right?”

Ignoring the murmurs nearby, I walked up to the teacher’s desk and placed down the stack of booklets I was carrying. Nakazato dropped his pile of papers beside mine with a soft thud.

“They didn’t tell us to hand these out, right?”

“Nope.”

We both answered, then turned to look at the blackboard. A single sheet of paper—our seating chart—was taped there. As my eyes skimmed over it, I felt my brows knit together.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nah… just realizing I barely know anyone here.”

Barely, or rather, *no one*.

I’d already braced myself for that, since hardly anyone from my old middle school ended up in this class—but seeing not a single familiar name still made me wonder if someone had planned it that way.

After confirming my seat number, I looked away from the chart and found Nakazato looking up at me.

He grinned and gave my back a light pat.

“You’ve got me, don’t you?”

“Eh…”

“Hey, come on! Don’t give me that reaction. You’re supposed to laugh it off so I don’t feel embarrassed.”

“Sorry. Thanks.”

Even though he was the one who said it, his ears turned red as he gave me another, harder pat on the back.

I was genuinely glad Nakazato ended up in the same class. Feeling the tension drain from my body, I exhaled in relief and stepped down from the podium toward my seat. But my feet stopped after only a few steps.

“Oh—sorry, this seat’s yours, right?”

A boy was sitting in my chair. When he noticed me, his sharp, handsome brows softened apologetically.

Before he could stand, I shook my head and hung my bag on the hook beside the desk.

“It’s fine. Class hasn’t started yet—go ahead and sit.”

“What about you, Watarai?”

A lazy-sounding voice came from the next seat over.

When I turned my head, I saw another boy gazing straight at me, looking like he couldn’t care less about anything.

“I, uh… promised to meet a friend, so…”

The lie came out automatically.

Either way, sitting there surrounded by unfamiliar faces didn’t sound appealing. It’d be easier to step out for a while.

The bathroom? The nurse’s office? Maybe the library. I ran through my options in my head.

Meanwhile, the boy with the composed, handsome face gave me an easy smile. He felt friendly—but in a different way from Nakazato.

“Then I’ll borrow your seat till you get back.”

“Be my guest.”

Pasting on a smile, I left the classroom.

About ten minutes until homeroom—plenty of time to kill.

“Hey, Watarai!”

As I walked down the corridor, a familiar face popped into view—one of my friends from last year.

Seeing him made the heaviness in my chest lift a little.

“How’s Class 5?”

“Barely know anyone there.”

“Hah! Don’t worry, you’ll be surrounded by people soon enough.”

Leaning casually against the wall, he laughed out loud. I gave a dry laugh back, but before I could reply, another voice called, “Yo!” from behind him.

When I looked up, a group of last year’s classmates—and a few of their friends—were approaching.

“How’s it going, man?”

“What’s wrong? Not happy with your class?”

“Oh, you’re *the* Watarai everyone’s talking about, huh?”

“Damn, you look like someone who’s already won at life.”

One of them eyed me up and down before bursting into laughter that echoed down the hall.

“So, what class are you in?”

“…Class 5.”

The instant I said it, my friend let out a loud “Ah!” that made everyone turn toward us. Feeling all eyes on him, he quickly pressed himself against the wall and lowered his voice.

“Wait—Class 5? That’s *the* class! With Morisaki, Hotta, and Nakazato, right?”

At his words, the others all nodded in unison with a chorus of “Ahh, right!”

“Class 5’s stacked! You’ve got all the best-looking guys in one room.”

“The cultural festival’s gonna be packed because of you guys.”

“Your homeroom teacher must be thrilled.”

“Hah! What are you, forming a host club now?”

They all burst into laughter.

As I just stood there watching them, one of the guys who’d been leaning against the wall straightened up.

“So, have you talked to them yet?”

“You mean those three?”

“Yeah.”

He nodded eagerly, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

I didn’t really have much of a story to tell—but by coincidence, I had just spoken to all three of them earlier.

“I talked with Nakazato quite a bit. Morisaki and Hotta—just a little.”

“Guess birds of a feather flock together, huh?”

“Hey hey, real question—what’s it like, good-looking guy to good-looking guy?”

“What do you mean ‘what’s it like’? They’re just… good-looking, I guess.”

The moment I said that, they exchanged glances—then burst into laughter again.

“No way that’s all you think!”

“C’mon, drop the modest act!”

“You probably think you’re hotter than them, don’t you?”

“Seriously, tell us the truth!”

All I did was answer honestly, but apparently that wasn't good enough. Not that I'd ever actually say "Yeah, I think I'm better-looking." What kind of idiot would? While I hesitated to respond, they kept talking on their own.

"Last year I was in the same class as Morisaki and Hotta, and honestly, Hotta's the better one."

"Better? What does that even mean?"

"No, really. Morisaki's the type who gives off this… superior vibe, you know? His face saves him."

"So what'd you even talk about with them?"

"Oh, I asked how many people they've dated."

"Idiot! That's totally on you!"

The sounds of slapping shoulders and loud laughter filled the hallway.

"What about Hotta?"

"Hmm… he's just a decent guy. Nothing more, nothing less."

"So just another good-looking dude? That's boring."

"Yeah, we need more personality in this lineup."

I heard the click of sandals against the hallway floor.

How long had it been? Homeroom should be starting any minute now.

"What about Nakazato?"

"Eh… I wouldn't even call him a 'pretty boy,' really. He's more the cute type."

"Yeah, and cute guys never have good personalities."

"So true, so true."

Their voices started to sound distant—like a TV playing in another room, even though they were right in front of me.

I could've told them to knock it off, but I didn't.

Maybe I was scared of being talked about the same way once I left.

“So who’s the most popular, you think?”

“Should we do a poll?”

“Oh, how about this prank—we call a girl out somewhere and have all four of you confess to her!”

“Then see who she picks?!”

“That’s hilarious! I wanna see the reactions!”

I took a step back, as if to escape the suffocating air around me. When my friends finally noticed me again, their faces drained of color in an instant.

“Wait! You’re not gonna tell them what we said, right?!”

“Every girl in school would hate us!”

“It’s just harmless jealousy toward good-looking guys!”

“We’ll treat you next time, okay? Just forget this ever happened!”

All I could do was give them a wry smile.

“Hmm… I’ll think about it.”

The words came out sounding almost cruel, tightening around my own throat. Yeah, I bet once I leave, they’ll say I’m “stuck-up” or “fake nice.” Must be nice—to be the kind of person who gets to judge others. Must be nice—not to care what anyone thinks.

Must be nice—not to be the one everyone’s watching.

“Homeroom’s starting!”

A teacher’s voice rang down the hallway.

The chatter instantly died, replaced by the frantic shuffle of sandals as everyone rushed back to their classrooms.

“Seriously, man, don’t tell anyone!”

“Come on, for the sake of our friendship!”

“Promise you won’t say a word!”

They shouted over their shoulders as they ran off.

Sure, I'd killed some time—but my mood had sunk to rock bottom.

When I got back to the classroom, our homeroom teacher still hadn't arrived, and the room buzzed with small talk here and there.

As I sat down, the lethargic-looking boy next to me—Morisaki—spoke up.

"Hey, he said thanks for letting him borrow your seat."

"Ah… no problem."

After answering Morisaki, I pulled a water bottle from my backpack and took a sip, as if to wash away the lingering discomfort in my chest.

Just as the cool water slid down my throat, the teacher finally entered the classroom.

"Good morning, everyone. I'll be your homeroom teacher starting today—"

After a brief self-introduction, the teacher picked up a stack of papers from the desk.

"We'll be collecting your report cards, so once you've written your name, please pass them back. The students in the last row of each column—sorry, but could you bring your column's stack up to me?"

I half-listened while pulling out my pencil case, when I heard Morisaki's lazy voice beside me.

"Hey."

When I turned, I saw him glancing at my pencil case.

"Forgot to bring a name pen. Lend me yours."

"Yeah, sure."

Once the report cards made it to our row, I wrote my name quickly. Almost wrote my old student number out of habit—but caught myself just in time. After handing my name pen to Morisaki, I got up to collect the booklets. As I walked along the row, scanning classmates' names, my steps stopped in front of one seat.

"…You didn't bring your pen case?"

“Ah—uh... well...”

The quiet-looking boy sitting there blushed bright red and shook his head, then finally nodded slightly.

The seat beside him belonged to a strong-willed-looking student, who was chatting animatedly with someone else. Probably why this kid hadn’t been able to ask anyone for help.

“Morozaki, pass me my name pen.”

“Yeah.”

I took the pen from Morozaki’s outstretched hand and offered it to the shy boy. He looked up, startled.

“Eh—are you sure?”

“Go ahead.”

“Th-thanks...”

He took it hesitantly and began writing his name.

“Should’ve just said I forgot mine too.”

“Or, like, borrow one from the teacher?”

The strong-willed classmate’s voice carried far enough for both of us to hear. Maybe I shouldn’t have interfered. But it was too late now. When he finished, he capped the pen, kept his eyes down, and handed it back to me.

“Th-thank you... very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

I took the report card and pen, finished collecting the rest, and turned them in to the teacher. As I returned to my seat, he was still looking down. Maybe it *was* unnecessary meddling— but I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

“Alright, it’s a bit early, but let’s move to the gym.”

After checking the number of papers, the teacher flipped off the lights, and the sound of chairs scraping filled the room.

When I glanced toward Nakazato's seat, he noticed my gaze, grinned, and jogged over.

"I thought we were gonna do self-introductions or something."

"Do second-years even do that?"

"Who knows? Depends on the teacher, maybe?"

Tilting his head, Nakazato's eyes slid naturally toward the seats beside me. Then he flashed his friendly smile again.

"You're Hotta and Morisaki, right? Let's get along this year."

"Yeah, same here."

"Nice to meet you."

Both of them stopped mid-step—Hotta with a bright, refreshing smile, and Morisaki with just a faint curve at the corner of his mouth.

I still didn't know what kind of person Morisaki was, but he seemed like the type who took a while to open up.

"Oh, Watarai. Thanks again for lending me your seat earlier."

"No problem."

Hotta said it with the same smile he'd just shown Nakazato. I returned it, and somehow, the four of us ended up heading to the gym together.

As we stepped into the hallway, the same murmuring I'd heard all day echoed around us— but apparently, I was the only one who noticed.

The other three just walked on casually.

When we reached the stairs, Nakazato suddenly spoke up.

"By the way, are you in any clubs?"

"I'm in the calligraphy club."

"Huh? You totally look like a sports type though, Hotta. Why calligraphy?"

"No big reason. My grandma used to teach it, so… kind of naturally, I guess."

“Then you must have good handwriting?”

“It’s average.”

“Should’ve had you write my name on the report card—with a brush, preferably.”

“Haha, what’s that supposed to mean?”

While the two talkative ones chatted ahead, Nakazato suddenly looked back at us.

“What about you two—Watarai and Morisaki? Any clubs?”

“I’m not in one.”

“Photography club. Barely any activity, though.”

I answered after Morisaki.

Truth is, I hadn’t planned to join any club at all, but my mom insisted I pick *something*. So I joined the photography club—the one that seemed to do the least. They had contests, apparently, but participation was optional, so I never bothered. Basically, I was no different from the “go-home” group.

“Thinking of joining something?”

Hotta noticed Nakazato’s thoughtful expression and asked. Nakazato lowered his gaze and muttered softly.

“Maybe something light, yeah.”

“Got any ideas?”

“Not really. But definitely not a sports club. And something not too active.”

“Then the photography club’s perfect for you—same as Watarai.”

“Do they have trial sessions or something?”

Nakazato looked up at me for confirmation.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t exactly involved enough to know the schedule. Actually, when *was* the last time we even met up?

“Sorry, I’m not sure.”

“No group chat or anything?”

“Nope. There’s nothing to announce anyway.”

“Then how do you know when there’s a meeting?”

“Last year, the homeroom teacher told us when.”

“Oh, that’s how it works, huh.”

By the time our conversation ended, we’d reached the gym entrance. After changing into indoor shoes and stepping inside, I noticed our class was the only one there so far.

Rows of folding chairs filled the space for the start-of-term ceremony.

“We’re sitting by student number, right?”

“Yeah. Lucky you, Watarai—you get the back row.”

As Nakazato swayed his body playfully, he suddenly stopped and glanced between me and Morisaki.

“What is it?”

“Ah, I was just wondering which of you is taller.”

“Taller?”

Following his gaze, I turned to look at Morisaki—who seemed to have had the same thought, since our eyes met sharply.

We were almost the same height, maybe he was just a bit taller.

“Watarai’s shorter.”

“…Huh?”

After being quiet this whole time, Morisaki finally spoke—only to smirk proudly through his nose.

I frowned.

Not that I cared about height, but there was something irritating about how he phrased it. He could’ve just said *he’s taller*—no need to point out *I’m shorter*.

As that small irritation lingered, I heard the sound of sneakers and chatter from behind. When I turned, other classes and teachers were filing into the gym.

“Guess we should line up.”

Nakazato started walking toward the rows of chairs, with Morisaki following behind. Hotta took a step, then turned back to me with an apologetic look, his well-shaped brows lowering slightly.

“Sorry about that.”

“Nah… don’t worry about it.”

I shook my head, then sat down in the very last row.

Maybe Morisaki was just a bit twisted—or maybe just immature. As I pictured my first-grade little brother in my head, a sharp *keeen* feedback sound rang from the mic.

“Good morning, second and third years. The new students will be entering soon—please welcome them with warm applause.”

The teacher—probably the vice principal—set down the mic and sat in one of the folding chairs lined up at the side.

That was the cue for music to start playing.

As applause rippled around the gym, I turned to see the new first-years walking in behind their homeroom teachers, their eyes darting nervously. Something about it felt nostalgic.

“Now then, we’ll begin the opening ceremony. All students, rise!”

At the teacher’s clear command, the realization finally hit me— we were really second-years now.

I’d thought the new term would be rough, but thanks to Nakazato and the others, the start… well, it wasn’t bad at all.

“Hey, you free after this? Let’s grab lunch.”

The first day of the new term ended before noon. I nodded to Nakazato’s suggestion, and the four of us lazily headed for the bus stop. Since all three grades had finished at the same time, a line had already formed.

After letting two buses pass, we finally made it to the station and walked to the fast-food place we'd decided on.

"Hope I get a good seat tomorrow."

"Seat changes make me weirdly nervous."

"Better rack up some karma now."

"Too late for that already."

Chatting about tomorrow's seat change, we entered the restaurant and claimed a window seat. As we surrounded our trays and started talking, the conversation naturally shifted to our pasts, and from there —to relationships.

"If you don't wanna say, it's fine, but… do you have a girlfriend right now?"

Nakazato lifted his straw from his mouth and asked.

His voice was casual, but his eyes sparkled with curiosity. When I glanced at Hotta and Morozaki to see who'd speak first, Hotta gave a quick, awkward look at Morozaki. That alone made me smirk a little.

"Let's start with Morozaki."

When I said that, Morozaki's face immediately twisted into a clear "hell no." He didn't seem willing to talk, so I shifted my gaze to Hotta instead, but he only shrugged shyly.

"He just got free from an older, clingy girlfriend, so don't reopen the wound."

"Well, that basically answered the question."

I laughed at Hotta's almost-complete answer, which only made Morozaki's scowl deepen. Seeing that, I suddenly remembered something a friend once said: *'Morozaki always looks like he's looking down on people.'*

Maybe he wasn't arrogant—just stressed from that bad relationship.

While I was thinking that, Morozaki muttered, still sounding irritated, as he crumpled the wrapper of his finished burger.

"What about you, Watarai?"

“I broke up last summer.”

“Oh, really? How long were you together?”

“Since the winter of second year of middle school… about a year and a half, I guess?”

“Why’d you break up?”

Apparently, no matter your looks or experience, love stories are something everyone’s curious about. The three of them leaned in slightly, waiting for me to speak.

“We just stopped getting along.”

“And what made you stop getting along?”

Nakazato said that, encouraging me to go on.

What was the deciding factor again? I tried to recall as I explained.

It started around the summer of second year. She was the one who confessed. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but I do remember how nervous and shy she looked, and I nodded because she was cute.

Middle school dating was childish—walking home together, going to the local mall—simple stuff like that.

Things started to feel off once we entered high school. We’d gone to different schools, so we met often on weekends to make up for the distance.

Our hangouts expanded—we took the train into the city, stayed out late, spent entire days together.

If you asked whether it was fun, I’d say I enjoyed our middle school days more. Because once she got a smartphone in high school, she couldn’t stop taking pictures everywhere we went.

I didn’t mind the photos themselves. What bothered me was what she did with them. “People commented, ‘You two are the perfect couple!’”

“I hit ten thousand followers!”

She’d say things like that, smiling—but it felt like she was smiling at the *version of us on her screen*, not at me.

The photos were just bait for likes.

Before I knew it, she'd stopped loving *me* and started loving *herself being with me*. Once I realized that, the warmth I felt toward her vanished. No matter where we went, she was glued to her phone, obsessed with follower counts. Being with her wasn't fun anymore.

I didn't want to be just another tool to feed her vanity. Last summer, I finally told her I wanted to break up.

I knew it wouldn't go smoothly, but it took a long time for her to accept it. She cried so hard she couldn't talk, then started shouting, and in the end, she just walked away silently, her emotions unreadable.

"So yeah, I'm not planning on dating anyone for a while."

I finished my melted cola as if to wrap up the story.

The three of them, who'd been listening quietly, exhaled deeply, like they were releasing tension.

After a brief silence, Morozaki suddenly went, "Ah."

"So… did she actually agree to break up?"

"Who knows. I cut off all contact, so I have no idea."

"She might try to get revenge or something."

"……"

I didn't think it'd go that far, but the thought made me uneasy. If anything happened to me, fine—but I didn't want any future girlfriend dragged into it. "Well… if something does happen, we've got your back."

"Yeah, you can talk to us anytime."

Maybe they noticed I'd gone quiet. Hotta and Nakazato spoke brightly, trying to cheer me up. I smiled at them, and then even Morozaki, maybe feeling the mood, began speaking himself.

"Honestly, my story's worse. You can use it as a warning."

That led into all three of them sharing their experiences. Turns out, everyone had their own mess. By the end, my own worries felt small

in comparison.

Actually, the stuff Morozaki and Nakazato had gone through didn't even sound like things our age should've experienced.

By the time we finished talking, the sun had already set. We wrapped up our idle chat and headed toward the station platform.

"You know… I think I might've misjudged you guys."

As Nakazato pulled out his pass case, he muttered that.

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm? Promise you won't get mad if I say?"

"Depends what it is."

Repeating the same kind of exchange as this morning, Nakazato smiled after glancing at Hotta and Morozaki.

"I'd heard stuff like—Morozaki milks money from girls, Hotta got accused of assault in middle school, Watarai's a player who dates multiple girls at once… a bunch of nonsense like that. But you guys are nothing like that."

I couldn't believe my ears. Who'd spread those rumors? When I looked at Nakazato for confirmation, he just gave a tired, weak smile, as if to say, *"Yeah, it's true."*

"Some people really live in their own fantasy world."

"Or maybe they've got too much imagination."

Morozaki snorted, and Hotta gave a small, exasperated laugh.

"Doesn't that kind of gossip or backtalk bother you?"

I asked, remembering all the times I'd overheard whispers about myself. The three of them looked at each other—one shook his head, another tilted it thoughtfully.

"Sounds like jealousy to me. Let them talk."

"Depends on how far it goes, but it doesn't really get to me."

"I try not to listen. Worrying too much just wears you out."

Even though we were all the same age, they suddenly seemed much more mature than I was. At the same time, I felt embarrassed for caring so much about what others thought.

When I finally parted ways with them and headed home, I felt lighter than I had that morning.

You really can't know someone until you talk to them. From now on, I'd stop letting rumors and prejudice guide me, and trust what I saw and felt myself.

That was my little "beautiful thought" on the first day of the new term — the day I became friends with Nakazato, Hotta, and Morozaki.

A few weeks later.

The way I met Hioki was honestly trivial.

"Class rep, lead the greeting— oh, wait, that's Hioki. For a second I thought it said 'class duty.'"

It was during either chemistry, earth science… or maybe biology. The teacher at the blackboard had turned and made that offhand joke. "Hioki" and "nichoku" (class duty) looked similar when written.

The class burst out laughing. I didn't mean to mock him, but I was one of them.

"Ah, sorry, sorry! Alright, quiet down— class is starting!"

Even after the teacher's voice echoed through the room, the class was still giggling and glancing toward the front row.

Following their gaze, I saw one boy.

That must be *Hioki*.

From where I sat, I could only see the back of his round head, but I was sure his expression was twisted with embarrassment.

"(…Poor guy.)"

Thinking that, I looked away from the back of his head and turned back to the fluttering pages of my textbook.

"Poor thing."

That was the first feeling I ever had toward Hioki.

A few days later, during lunch break.

We were chatting as we ate when a loud voice suddenly rang through the classroom.

“Hey! Anyone seen Hioki?”

I looked up to see a boy leaning halfway into the room from the front door, scanning the class.

He clearly wasn’t from our class. I gave him a glance, then instinctively looked toward Hioki’s seat.

But the round head wasn’t there.

“He’s not here.”

“You don’t know where he went?”

“I dunno.”

“Eh～? Maybe he went to pick some flowers?”

A classmate who seemed close to Hioki answered, and the loud student dashed off toward the restroom.

“Who’s Hioki again?”

Once the loud guy disappeared, Morozaki muttered while scrolling on his phone.

“That guy. You know, ‘class duty.’”

“Class duty?”

“The one who got teased because his name looks like that.”

“Ahh… right, that guy.”

When I answered, Morozaki just took a lazy bite of his bread, clearly uninterested. He probably didn’t even remember.

Well, it wasn’t exactly a memorable incident anyway, so I couldn’t blame him.

“I’m back～. The shop was totally packed today.”

“No kidding—like a concert crowd.”

When Nakazato and Hotta came back from the school store, we resumed our lunch where we left off.

And after a while, I completely forgot about Hioki.

It just so happened that the committee meeting dragged on. Not mine—Hotta’s and Morozaki’s.

Nakazato, who was in the same committee, said he had plans and left early.

When I went to the classroom to wait for the other two, it seemed someone was already inside.

I could hear several voices talking.

I didn’t want to interrupt, so I was about to turn back when I caught a familiar topic.

“How about those popular guys?”

“What do you mean, ‘how about’… I’ve never talked to them.”

“Well, Hioki’s not the type to approach people himself.”

“The girl next to him apparently likes Watarai.”

So it was that kind of conversation again.

I didn’t want to listen. I’d already decided not to care. But for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to move.

“What’s Watarai like?”

“Eh… I told you, I haven’t talked to him.”

“C’mon, even your impression’s fine.”

I heard footsteps and the sound of paper shuffling—probably the class roster on the teacher’s desk.

“Hurry up, practice is starting.”

“Just a second…”

My heart was pounding loudly.

What kind of things would someone I'd never even spoken to say about me? Would it be the same blunt rumors Nakazato mentioned—the kind you'd rather not hear?

I held my breath and waited for the boy behind the door to speak.

"He seems… kind?"

"Eh—……?"

Without meaning to, I gasped quietly, then clamped a hand over my mouth. I'd expected sarcasm or mockery—especially since I wasn't even there. Surely he wouldn't have any reason to speak kindly about me.

Luckily, my voice didn't reach them, and the conversation continued.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he lent me a pen once."

"Haah? Anyone can do that though. I was hoping you'd say something more exciting."

"Like what?"

"Like—he's dating some famous influencer! Or his parents are celebrities!"

"I wouldn't know."

Even though I'd heard the whole exchange, the only voice that stuck in my head was Hioki's. He said I *seemed kind*—just because I lent him a pen? Why?

Did he really mean it, or did he just say it because he had nothing else to add? Probably the latter… but still, I'd never heard anyone talk about me positively before.

Just like on the first day of term, I'd expected them to gossip about who's the most handsome or whatever.

"Crap! We're gonna be late!"

"We'll get stuck doing extra drills!"

"Only 'cause you made us stay!"

“You guys are the ones who asked!”

As the commotion faded and the footsteps rushed down the hall, I slipped away to the stairwell, watching them run off.

Among them, I caught sight of that familiar round head and couldn’t help smiling softly.

When the classroom finally went quiet, I stepped inside. Glancing at the slightly messy desks, I climbed onto the teacher’s platform.

“Hioki… Asahi, huh.”

I straightened the attendance sheet and stared at the name **Hioki Asahi**, trying to burn it into my memory.

Maybe for the first time, someone of the *same gender* had complimented something about who I was—my *personality*, not appearance. And not even directly, but in a conversation he thought I’d never hear.

If it had been from a girl, maybe I’d have felt differently. But being praised by another guy—it was… surprisingly nice.

A warmth spread quietly in my chest, and I found myself smiling without realizing it. Maybe I was easier to please than I thought.

“Eh—why are you smiling to yourself?”

“Did something good happen?”

While my impression of Hioki was shooting sky-high, I heard the familiar voices I’d been waiting for.

When I looked up, there were Morozaki, frowning as usual, and Hotta, tilting his head curiously.

“Yeah, something good happened—but I’m not telling.”

“Come on, now I really wanna know.”

“If Nakazato were here, he’d make you spill.”

“Committee’s over, so let’s go home already.”

I just smiled at their grumbling and hopped down from the platform, heading toward the school entrance.

Before that day, Hioki was just the quiet guy who got teased by a teacher and had one loud friend.

But from that moment on, I couldn't stop noticing him. And, if I'm honest, that was when I first started wanting to talk to him.

A few days later, during classical literature class.

The room was silent except for the teacher's voice.

Outside, you could faintly hear laughter from the schoolyard and the distant hum of traffic. Time flowed slowly—until it was abruptly broken by a sudden sound.

The door opened, and everyone turned to look. I did too.

"Sorry, I was at the eye clinic."

A boy wearing glasses over an eyepatch on his left eye bowed briefly before hurrying to his seat near the front.

It was clearly not the look of someone who'd overslept. The class buzzed with whispers until the teacher scolded them back to quiet.

"…Hey, what happened to 'Class Duty' guy?"

"Did he, like, get into an accident?"

"Just the eye? Doesn't seem like a car crash."

Hearing the nearby chatter confirmed it—

That was Hioki.

I'd heard his name often, but I think this was the first time I'd actually seen his face. Well, half of it—his left eye was covered, so I couldn't say I'd *really* seen him.

From how people teased him, I'd imagined he'd be more outgoing. But the impression I got was the opposite—quiet, composed, gentle.

When I glanced toward the front again, Hioki was talking briefly with the student behind him.

He smiled softly, then turned back around, showing me that familiar round back of his head again.

My eyes drifted to the eyepatch. Wasn't it inconvenient? How did he manage stairs, or PE?

I half-joked, half-seriously thought about talking to him—but in the end, I couldn't.

The more I noticed him, the harder it became to say anything. It had been over a month since I'd started paying attention to Hioki, yet I hadn't even managed a simple "good morning."

If he already had a fixed friend group, maybe I wouldn't be so hung up on wanting to talk to him.

But, fortunately—or maybe unfortunately—he drifted between groups, never sticking with one.

He got along with everyone, but not *especially* close to anyone. That tiny gap gave me false hope that maybe… I had a chance.

"Today we'll be discussing the school trip, but first, let's decide on groups."

I hadn't been paying attention to the teacher until that moment. The class instantly came alive with chatter—students in front laughing, "Let's be in the same group!"

When I glanced forward, Hioki was alone at his desk, facing forward as usual. Was he deciding which group to join? Or just not paying attention at all?

"……"

Maybe this was my chance to invite him.

But… what would he think?

Wouldn't it be awkward to be asked out of nowhere by someone he'd never even talked to?

If only I'd at least said hi before…

I sighed quietly, frustrated with myself.

"Write your group members' names on this sheet."

Nakazato came over with a paper in hand, pulled a chair next to me, and sat down. It seemed we'd entered a free period—groups were

forming all over the room.

When I glanced again, Hioki was still sitting alone.

So… did that mean he hadn't decided yet?

"Write Watarai's name too."

"Eh, oh—yeah…"

Morozaki, sitting beside Nakazato, pointed at the paper before pulling out his phone and immediately slacking off.

Looking at the form, I saw six boxes.

Groups could have up to six people.

We had four.

If it was just Hioki alone—he'd fit perfectly.

Filling in the names by attendance order, Nakazato ended up as leader (without asking, but oh well).

After writing everyone's names, I stared at the empty box for a moment, then looked up.

Hioki was glancing around the room at the already-formed groups, but his eyes never landed on ours.

"Can we add one more person?"

""""Eh?""""

All three of them looked at me at once, question marks practically floating above their heads. Their reaction was only natural—and it made my body tense up. Still, I had no intention of taking my words back.

Now… how should I explain this?

There's no real connection between Hioki and me. They knew that, and they had no connection with him either.

As I hesitated, Nakazato glanced around the room and tilted his head.

"You wanna add someone?"

“Yeah. It’d be kind of sad if he was all alone.”

I couldn’t bring myself to say *I want to be friends with him*, so I hid my true feelings and looked toward Hioki.

The three of them followed my gaze.

Nakazato and Hotta probably wouldn’t mind—but the question was whether Morozaki would agree.

I braced myself for whatever reaction might come, but when Hotta turned toward me, he nodded more easily than I expected.

“I don’t mind.”

“Ah, thanks.”

The tension in my shoulders melted away all at once at his easygoing answer. Was he just kind—or too kind—or maybe just indifferent to everything? As I was thinking something that rude, Nakazato, still looking a bit puzzled, nodded too.

“I’m fine with it too, but… wouldn’t it be awkward for him? Being with a group he’s not close to?”

“...We’ll let Hioki decide whether he wants to join or not.”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean to shut down your goodwill, Watarai. I’m totally fine with it.”

Nakazato smiled lightly and turned to Morozaki. I followed his gaze too. When Morozaki looked back toward Hioki again, my heart started pounding. All I could do now was hold my breath and wait.

Then Morozaki turned toward us and gave a small nod—just as casually as Hotta had.

“Sure. If he’s a pain, I’ll just dump everything on Watarai.”

“...I don’t think he’s that type of guy.”

Now it was my turn to be confused.

I’d expected them to say no, or at least bombard me with *“Why?”* The fact that everything went so smoothly made me wonder if I was dreaming.

“Alright, I’ll go call him then.”

“Eh—wait—”

Before I could stop him, Hotta stood up and headed straight for Hioki. I was the one who made the suggestion, but all I could do was watch him go. Feeling dazed, I pinched my arm to make sure this wasn’t a dream. The pain spreading through my skin told me it was very real.

“Hioki’s joining our group.”

I’d finally regained a bit of calm, but before I could prepare myself, two shadows fell over me.

When I looked up, Hotta was smiling, and beside him stood Hioki—clearly confused.

Hioki’s eyes moved from Nakazato to Morozaki, then finally to me. He tugged lightly at Hotta’s sleeve and whispered something into his ear. While I watched the two of them standing close together, I could hear murmurs coming from behind me.

“...Why Hioki? Were they ever close?”

“...He’s joining that face-genius group?”

“...Wow, dude’s got guts.”

“...Isn’t he gonna totally stand out?”

I was sick of how easily I could pick up those whispers. I was the one who decided to invite Hioki—and Hotta was the one who actually went to talk to him.

But hearing classmates jump to their own conclusions irritated me enough that I grabbed the paper from the desk.

“Hey, it’s decided, right? Can I write his name?”

Terrible first impression.

I probably made it worse by sounding irritated—and worse yet, I didn’t even give Hioki the choice to say yes or no himself.

Regret hit me immediately.

Still, it was better than him ending up in some random group where

people would only gossip behind his back.

Before I knew it, I wasn't just trying to be friendly—I was *determined* to make sure Hioki joined our group.

Unaware of all that, Hioki just looked puzzled, then slowly released Hotta's sleeve.

"You're Watarai, right? Is it okay if I join?"

That was the first time I'd ever talked to him.

Finally meeting the person I'd been so curious about felt strange—like the air had shifted.

His eyes were on the smaller side, with a faint upward tilt—what people might call *sanpaku eyes*.

But the slightly drooping eyebrows softened his whole expression. He looked quiet, maybe even calm, giving off a mature atmosphere compared to most of us. Just an ordinary high school boy—yet somehow, different.

Hioki frowned slightly, maybe wondering why I wasn't answering. I couldn't afford to make his first impression of me any worse, so I hurried to respond and quickly turned my face away to hide how flustered I was. Then, on the paper in front of me, I wrote the name I'd memorized that day: **Hioki Asahi**

They say a name reflects the person.

He didn't strike me as "bright like the morning sun," but he definitely had a warmth that made the name feel right.

When I looked up, by chance—or fate—our eyes met. I started to look away, worried he'd think I'd been staring at him all this time. But then, unexpectedly, Hioki smiled.

For a second, I froze.

I didn't know what kind of smile it was, but I quickly smiled back, hoping to fix my earlier clumsiness.

Once the groups were settled and the chatter died down, the teacher instructed us to pair up with a girls' group next.

And, of all people, the girls who approached us were the ones who'd

sat next to that girl I'd lent my pen to.

I didn't want to hang out with them—they didn't exactly like us—but as long as we didn't have to talk much, it'd be fine.

The guys in our group, all still recovering from recent breakups, got overly sensitive whenever girls came near.

As soon as they left, the conversation turned to who might be crushing on who. In that moment, Morozaki glanced toward Hioki.

"Maybe they're after Hioki."

"No way."

The denial slipped out before I could stop it.

I knew it was just a joke, but still—it bothered me.

I didn't want anyone else to get closer to Hioki before I did. I was the one who'd noticed him first.

I didn't want anyone interfering with what might be my first real attempt at making a friend.

When I looked at Hioki, he had his lips pressed together tightly, nodding a few times. After that, the conversation went on, but Hioki didn't say much himself. He really did seem like a quiet person.

When the homeroom teacher came back with the trip itineraries, everyone started returning to their seats.

"See you."

When Hioki stood up, I waved, and he hesitantly waved back. That simple, friendly gesture made me smile without thinking.

I was glad the others had agreed to my idea.

Glad Hotta had gone to talk to him.

Glad Hioki had chosen to join us.

Would it be okay if I said "good morning" to him tomorrow? Could we walk together between classes?

As I accepted the trip itinerary handout, my chest felt light and warm.

This is bad—I'm *really* looking forward to the school trip.

Chapter 12: WATARAI'S POV PT2

Chapter Summary

Watarai's friends are so supportiveeeee

I couldn’t sleep for a lot of reasons.

Of course, I’d been thinking about how to get closer to Hioki—but on top of that, my little brother Tsumugi had been fiercely against the school trip, so my lack of sleep had doubled. This morning, he even cried like we were parting for the last time.

Still not fully awake, I was shuffling along when one of the boys ran past me. He’s so full of energy this early in the morning. For no real reason, my eyes followed where he was headed—and by some coincidence, he stopped right next to a familiar back.

“…Nice.”

“What is?”

I turned toward the sudden voice, and before I realized it, Nakazato was walking beside me. Just like on the first day of the new semester, he rubbed his sleepy eyes.

“So? What’s nice?”

“Not telling.”

“Man, stingy.”

Nakazato turned away with a dissatisfied “hmph” and gave a small yawn. When I looked back at Hioki, he was lightly tapping one of his friends on the shoulder, laughing together. That’s my goal—to get that close to him. If possible, even closer.

“Hotta and the others said they’re by the flowerbed.”

Just as I was quietly burning with determination, Nakazato spoke while still looking down at his phone. I reflexively opened mine; in

the group chat, there was a message from Hotta— and one from Hioki, sent a few minutes earlier.

After turning on notifications, I looked up and spotted Hioki standing off by himself, apparently finished talking with his friends. I motioned toward him with my eyes.

“Hioki’s over there too. Let’s meet up with him before we go.”

“’Kay～.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nakazato nod, and I quickened my pace. I had to catch him before he wandered off again.

Feeling a little nervous, I walked up to Hioki, who was pulling out his phone.

“Morning.”

When I called out, Hioki slowly lifted his head. The cheerful expression he’d had with his friends was completely gone. He glanced at me and Nakazato with those small eyes of his and murmured “Morning,” putting his phone back into his pocket. Dragging our rolling suitcases along, we started walking toward Hotta and Morisaki. My head was full of thoughts.

Crap. What should I talk about?

Come to think of it, I didn’t really have any topics I could get excited about with Hioki. We’d talked a few times before, but he wasn’t the type to start a conversation himself, so it was even harder to tell.

“I’m really bad at mornings… I wonder if I’ll be able to wake up.”

As expected of him—Nakazato, the mood-maker and savior. He shattered the silence in an instant.

After silently thanking him, I glanced at Hioki, but he was facing forward, looking uninterested.

“As long as one person can wake up, it’ll be fine, right?”

He said that, as if to join in on the conversation.

Honestly, it was a bit of a stereotype, but he *did* seem serious. Besides, all four of us in the group—myself included—were bad at mornings, so having a reliable type around would help.

I watched him, waiting for a reaction, and Hioki looked at me and Nakazato again, then shook his head.

“Nah, mornings are rough for me too.”

“But you’re in a sports club, right?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

That surprised me… and at the same time, I froze a little. Truth is, I’d never actually heard what club Hioki was in. I’d just assumed he was in a sports club because, the day he called me “kind,” I’d seen a racket slung across his back as he ran down the hall.

Feeling a bead of cold sweat, I averted my gaze—and met Nakazato’s troubled look. For a second I panicked, thinking he was reacting to what I said, but apparently he was just worried about waking up early tomorrow.

Before Hioki could notice my slip, I quickly explained that *all four* of us were bad at mornings. Hioki nodded like he understood.

“Since it’s a school trip, the environment’s different—someone’s bound to wake up early.”

Thank god. He probably didn’t notice.

I sighed in relief and nodded along with him. Maybe Hioki was more easygoing than I thought—or maybe he noticed and just let it slide. Either way, he didn’t seem like the type I had to tiptoe around. That alone made things easier.

When we met up with Hotta and Morisaki and were chatting idly, we heard the teachers telling everyone to line up. I caught Hioki before he could slip to the back and pulled him in front of me.

Seeing that familiar round back of his right in front of me felt strangely surreal.

The principal’s greeting started, still in the opening part of his speech. Apparently already bored, Hioki in front of me couldn’t stay still. Barely two minutes had passed, and his focus was already gone.

Whether because he hadn’t fixed it or just didn’t care, the bit of hair sticking up on his head swayed gently. I was watching it when he suddenly turned around. I panicked and tried to face the principal

again—but Hioki's gaze wasn't on me. It was aimed somewhere behind me. Probably Morisaki, or maybe our homeroom teacher. Maybe he needs the bathroom? Or… is he feeling sick? I started to worry. Then, as he turned back to the front, our eyes met. When I tilted my head questioningly, Hioki smiled softly and shook his head.

"What the hell was that…"

The words slipped out under my breath.

I had no idea what he meant by shaking his head—or why he smiled like that. I thought I was starting to understand him, but now it felt like I was back at square one. I don't get it at all. I can't tell what Hioki's thinking.

✳

"I'm fine with that seat—the middle of the back row."

I think that was the first time Hioki spoke up on his own. It was during a childish argument over not wanting to sit next to a girl.

None of us expected him to suggest something himself, so we all stared at him in surprise. …This might be my chance.

While Nakazato, Hotta, and Morisaki were still taken aback, I pulled myself together and spoke to Hioki, who looked mildly exasperated. Doing my best to sound casual— "Then I'll sit next to you."

I blurted out exactly what I wanted. But really, that was the only way to secure the seat beside him.

Was that too suspicious?

When I glanced at Hioki, he was just staring at me, a little blankly.

"That okay?"

I asked, pushing a bit, and he nodded without hesitation. Oh—it's fine? Guess it never hurts to ask.

On the bus, Hioki stayed quiet as ever.

The only real moment of contact was when our shoulders bumped.

"Sorry."

His voice didn't match his words—it sounded a little irritated. When I looked over, he seemed uncomfortable.

Yeah… he probably didn't like that. I felt bad—but not bad enough to give up the seat. If I switched, there was a chance the girls would start talking to me. And since this was my chance to get closer to Hioki, I didn't want to waste it.

"You can lean on me if you want."

Maybe I was just getting cocky after winning that seat beside him. Honestly, it was such a childish move, even my little brother—who bawled his eyes out this morning—would laugh at me.

Would he snap and say, "Then switch seats"? Or just ignore me? Part of me actually wanted to see what a pissed-off Hioki looked like.

"Thanks."

He glanced at me for a second, then sat back properly. His tone was still a bit curt, but—

Ah. So he doesn't get angry. Or maybe he just doesn't *want* to, since we'll be stuck together for the next three days. No one wants bad vibes this early in the trip. If that's the case, maybe I can step a little closer.

I looked at him again; he was blankly watching our teacher do roll call.

As the bus drove toward the station, the group started talking about a trending app—some weird one that compares human faces to animals.

"Gorillas and monkeys sound bad, but it kinda means you're the most human, right?"

"Maybe… whoa, there's crocodiles too. Guess that means big mouths?"

"I don't get the criteria."

"The reviews are all over the place."

While reading the app's reviews, I suddenly realized something. Crap—I left Hioki out of the conversation.

Feeling guilty, I glanced sideways. He didn't seem bothered; maybe he

was just bored, reaching for his phone.

“Hey, you know this one? It diagnoses what animal you look like using face recognition.”

Before he could sink into his own world, I lifted my phone toward him. He looked at the screen, then shook his head. “Never heard of it.” Huh, really? It had gone viral online; I thought at least he’d recognize the name. Maybe he doesn’t use social media much.

Either way, that worked in my favor.

“Try it, Hioki.”

Honestly, I was curious too—and it was a perfect chance to keep the conversation going. I quickly switched to camera mode and pulled him close by the shoulder.

(Oh crap, did it again.)

Too late to take it back.

People are usually split on that kind of casual contact—some don’t care, others do. Hioki might be the second type.

But my worry was for nothing. He didn’t pull away; he just stared seriously at the screen. Ah, this is fine too, huh.

Watching his focused side profile, I let out a small breath of relief. Seems that bold move paid off.

While I was feeling relieved, he muttered something quietly. I leaned in to check the result.

“You’re… a cat face, huh.”

Cat. The word was displayed in fancy lettering. A cat, huh… now that I think about it, it fits—drifting around, showing different expressions only to people he’s close with.

“What about you guys? What did you get?”

He was the one who asked this time.

Maybe he thought the app was fun, or maybe it was just natural conversation—but either way, the casual friendliness made me smile.

After everyone finished, Hotta complained about his result and decided to retake it. As I switched screens to clear my photos, I must have tapped something wrong, because a different page popped up. My finger hovered over the “back” button—until I saw the text at the edge of the screen.

“Wait—it says you can use regular photos too.”

So it could analyze images from your gallery, not just live camera shots. Either way, I was planning to take a photo with Hioki as a memento of this trip—whatever he ended up thinking of me, I still wanted that memory. I didn’t know if he was the type to let people take photos, so this was the perfect excuse.

I raised my phone; Morisaki was on my right, Hioki on my left. Morisaki leaned in easily, but Hioki hesitated, half-out of frame.

“C’mere a little closer.”

By now I’d learned roughly how much contact he was okay with, so I pulled him in again by the shoulder. While adjusting the angle, I noticed through the screen that his eyes were on me.

Oh, did I cross a line this time? It felt like the same distance as before—maybe I overdid it? But then he turned back to the camera and pressed against me just slightly.

“Taking it.”

I clicked the shutter.

When it was done, Morisaki immediately moved away, but Hioki stayed put, still watching the screen, maybe curious about the result.

Honestly, I had no idea if he minded being this close or not. The result came up the same as before, and I saved the photo. Since it said to smile for better accuracy, Hioki’s grin looked a lot like the one he’d given his friends earlier. While waiting for Nakazato and Hotta’s results from the front seat, Hioki spoke again. Maybe the friendlier he got, the more talkative he became.

“Hey, do people not say ‘cheese’ anymore?”

“Cheese? What?”

I tilted my head, not getting it. Hioki gave a small nod and explained.

“You know, when you take a photo, people go, ‘Say cheese.’”

Ah, that.

When we were little or getting our photos taken by someone else, sure—but lately, no one really says it. I’d forgotten.

Still, I didn’t expect something that innocent to come out of Hioki’s mouth. When I glanced at Morisaki, he seemed to think the same—we both started laughing.

“I just forgot, since we take them without a cue now.”

“So you’re a ‘say cheese’ type, huh, Hioki?”

As we laughed, Hioki added, as if remembering something—

“Or like, ‘Three, two, one,’ works too.”

“‘That’s a photo booth thing!’” we both shouted at once.

Guess he’s funny, too.

I was laughing so hard my shoulders shook, and then Hioki laughed with us—“Ahaha!” …He laughed.

“Hey, don’t leave us out,” Nakazato’s voice pulled me back from my satisfied daze. I took his phone, and the conversation got even livelier—with Hioki fully part of it this time.

Damn… we haven’t even arrived yet, and this is already so much fun.

✳

Even on the bullet train, I found a new side of him.

Just like on the bus, he took the middle seat of three, then turned toward me from the window.

“Hey, is it okay if I keep this open?”

He pointed at the window blind, looking oddly excited. Maybe it was because he’d escaped sitting next to a girl—or maybe he just liked trains.

“You don’t have to ask. If it’s too bright I’ll say so. What, you like the view?”

“Yeah. I do.”

The words and his expression made me catch my breath. A high schooler who could say “I like it” with such an open smile actually existed. At an age when embarrassment usually wins out.

“…Yeah?”

Unable to say “Oh, really,” I just muttered and turned away, pretending to fix my bag. He acts quiet, but then talks normally. He looks serious, but then smiles easily. I can’t figure him out—and that just makes me want to know more.

“Got our lunches.”

While I was plugging my phone charger in, Nakazato came over with our bento boxes. We all laughed when Hotta accidentally called a *makunouchi* bento a *bakumatsu* bento, and started setting up to eat. Then, from beside me, some food items slid into my box—not from Hioki, but from Morisaki.

“I hate konnyaku. You want it, Watarai?”

“Nah—hey, don’t just dump it in there.”

“I’ll throw in my tomato too.”

“Not helping.”

Ignoring my protests, Morisaki shoved his leftovers into my lunch and started eating again, looking satisfied.

As I sighed and glanced down, the bright orange of the tomato caught my eye. It wasn’t that I couldn’t eat it—it just stood out too much on its own.

“Got too much from Morisaki, so I’ll give some to you, Hioki.”

I slid the extra pieces into his box. He accepted them silently and ate without complaint. So that’s fine too, huh.

Being accepted wasn’t a bad thing, but at this point, it was starting to worry me a little—not just whether he was forcing himself, but whether *I* was starting to lose my sense of restraint.

*

After lunch, Hioki suddenly went quiet.

His heavy eyelids were half open as he gazed out the window. The sunlight streaming in must have felt nice—he looked like he could drift off to dreamland any second.

“Tired?”

I lowered my voice to ask, but he didn’t answer—just nodded, his head bobbing forward and back.

“I’ll wake you when we get there. You can sleep.”

“Thanks.”

Hioki gave a small reply, shifted in his seat to get comfortable, and closed his eyes.

“You like him, don’t you? Hioki.”

When I finally tore my eyes away from Hioki, Morisaki hit me with that out of nowhere. All I could do was blink at him, completely thrown off, and it took me a while before I managed to force any words out.

“Huh? …Who likes who?”

“You. You like Hioki.”

“What? Why would you say that?”

“’Cause you keep staring at him.”

“Staring…? Of course I am. I’m the one who suggested this, and it’s not like I’ve got any close friends here.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Morisaki shook his head, looking exasperated, and leaned back in his seat.

“I’m talking about before today.”

“Before? When?”

“Uh… I dunno, just—every day? When we get to school, during class, when we’re moving between rooms…”

No way. Was I really staring that much? I had no memory of it, but just the thought that I might've been doing it unconsciously made me freeze up. Still, if you asked whether I *liked* Hioki, the answer would be **no**. I just want to be friends—that's all. It's not like I have any special feelings for him.

"I like him though."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, he doesn't ask weird stuff like 'how many people have you slept with~?' and he's just… normal fun to be around."

"Oh… if that's what you mean, then yeah, I guess I like him too."

"Hmm. Oh, did you watch that video I sent you the other day?"

Morisaki suddenly changed the topic again and looked down at his phone, probably searching for the video. While waiting for him, my eyes drifted to Hioki, as always. He was leaning a little toward the window, his chest rising and falling steadily in sleep. Maybe the sunlight was too warm—his cheeks were slightly flushed.

Now that I thought about it, I'd never heard Hioki make sarcastic remarks like our other friends did. Including that afternoon after school, maybe I just liked him as a person.

I reached my arm past his face to block the light and quietly lowered the window blind. He liked looking at the scenery, but I could raise it again before he woke up. When I turned back to my seat, Morisaki smirked.

"You're staring again."

"Shouldn't you wake him up soon?"

While I was deep in conversation with Morisaki, Nakazato came back from the bathroom and pointed at the window seat.

Oh, right—he was sleeping. I turned my head and saw Hioki, still sound asleep, his body leaning pretty far to one side. Every time the bus shook, he looked like he might bump his head.

"Hioki, we're almost there."

I lifted the blind and called out, but he didn't stir. I gave him a small shake to keep his head from hitting anything, but even that didn't

wake him. Right, he did say he was bad at waking up. I steadied his head and shook him a bit harder this time. After four or five tries, his eyelids finally opened, though he still looked dazed and out of it.

“Hey, Hioki. C’mon, wake up.”

When I called again, he blinked a few times and stared right at me. Definite just-woke-up face—his usual sharp eyes were soft and droopy, and his hair stuck up worse than it had in the morning.

“Thanks.”

His voice was hoarse as he muttered his thanks and reached for a bottle in the drink holder. Maybe he still didn’t have his strength back; he was struggling with the cap. I was about to help, but just then he managed to get it off himself.

My hand froze awkwardly midair. Not knowing what to do with it, I ended up lightly placing it on the back of his head.

“Your hair’s sticking up.”

I smoothed down the messy strands with my fingers—not that it really helped much, but at least it covered the weird gesture. When I pulled my hand away, Hioki touched the spot I’d brushed and said quietly, “Thanks.”

We gathered our things, and right then the bus reached the station. It still didn’t feel real that we were in Kansai.

What were we doing next again? I was about to ask Hioki, who was walking behind me toward the exit, when I heard a sharp crack and a soft grunt.

I turned back immediately—he was covering his mouth, embarrassed. Our eyes met.

“It’s fine, I didn’t hear anything.”

Saying that basically gave away that I had, but it was just a light joke. I made sure to sound gentle, and he hit me lightly on the back in embarrassment. Moments like that—simple, friendly back-and-forth—were happening more often now, and I couldn’t help smiling to myself.

I realized I’d messed up again once we were inside the Noh theater.

The teacher had told us to sit with our group, so of course I'd planned to sit next to Hioki. But I'd underestimated how narrow the entrance was and how many students there'd be. In the crowd, I lost sight of him, and when I finally got a seat, it was the one farthest from his.

When the performance ended and the actors started talking, I leaned to the side to glance at him. He wasn't asleep—probably thanks to all the rest he got on the train—but he was chatting with Hotta.

I turned back slowly before any teacher noticed me staring too much.

(What are they talking about?)

It was just a simple question. That was all, and yet, for some reason, my chest felt tight. Maybe it was just the stuffy air of a small theater packed with people—but no, it didn't feel like that kind of suffocation.

I sighed and told myself, next time, don't lose sight of him. While thinking that, I watched our grade chair giving thanks into the mic to the performers and staff.

Like fate mocking me, I lost him again. The exit was still a mess of students. If they'd kept us separated by class, it might've been easier, but the teachers seemed content as long as everyone made it back to the bus. They were chatting with the theater staff off to the side.

Hioki wasn't especially tall or short—just average—so with everyone wearing the same uniform, he was hard to spot.

(He really is like a cat.)

I sighed as I put on my shoes, when someone tapped my shoulder. For a moment I thought it was Hioki, but when I looked down, it was Nakazato. We were about the same height, which made it confusing.

"What's up?"

"Looks like it's raining. You got an umbrella?"

"Yeah."

"Then let me in?"

"Sure."

After nodding to him, I took out my folding umbrella and stepped outside. The rain was heavier than expected, and most of the students

were hurrying toward the buses.

“Hey, they’re giving out umbrellas!”

“For real?!”

Just as I was about to open mine, I heard Hotta shouting behind me. As soon as Nakazato heard that, he ran back inside the theater.

Guess I wasn’t needed anymore. Oh well—less chance of getting wet alone anyway.

As I stepped aside to wait for them, I spotted the one person I’d been looking for. My eyes widened.

(…Why’s he crying?)

Hioki was standing there, rubbing his eyes and looking down. My feet moved before I could think, carrying me closer until I could peek at his face.

“What’s wrong? Was it that moving?”

It was a clumsy line—something to cover for the chance he wasn’t actually crying. Why couldn’t I just talk to him normally?

And then I immediately regretted it. His eyes were red and swollen, with tears still clinging to his lashes. He really *was* crying.

I gasped, startled, and he shook his head while rubbing his left eye.

“No, my contact fell out.”

Oh. Good—well, not good for him, but at least not what I feared. Relief washed through me. Just as I was wondering how to help him deal with it, he suddenly looked up, his expression almost hopeful.

“Watarai, you got an umbrella?”

“Yeah. You don’t?”

“Nope. Can I share with you?”

“Sure, but—”

I almost asked if he’d be okay with how small it was, but stopped myself. If he went to borrow one from someone else like Nakazato did,

I'd lose my chance. I couldn't risk that— not after losing sight of him earlier in the theater.

Hioki didn't seem to notice my hesitation.

"You have bad eyesight, Watarai?"

"Nope."

"I see… um, I lost one of my contacts, so my vision feels weird—like half on land, half underwater."

In short, he couldn't see properly. He explained it that way, but honestly, I didn't get it. Still, his uncomfortable expression made it clear enough. I nodded.

"So I wanna take the other one out."

"If you do, you really can't see anything?"

"Just shapes, kinda blurry… but it's dark now, so basically nothing."

"I see."

Poor guy. Must be rough having bad eyesight. I nodded sympathetically, thinking of the time I'd seen him wearing glasses over an eye patch.

Speaking of which—where *was* that pair of glasses now? In his bag? On the bus? While my thoughts drifted, his voice reached my ears again, faint but steady.

"...Can I hold onto something?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

I only caught the last part of what he said, and since it didn't seem connected to his bad vision, I asked back, confused. Hioki frowned slightly at my tone but continued explaining. Basically, since he couldn't see well, he was afraid of bumping into things and wanted to hold onto my clothes or my backpack.

It sounded kind of like something you'd say to your grandpa, and the image of an old-man Hioki popped into my head, almost making me laugh.

"…Alright. Sure."

“If it’s awkward, I can just grab someone else.”

Trying not to laugh, I answered, and Hioki furrowed his brow again — he must’ve misunderstood my reaction.

I had no intention of letting him go off with someone else, so I pretended not to hear that part and started opening my umbrella. Then Hioki unzipped his backpack pocket.

“Ah, wait. I’m gonna take the other one out too.”

He took out a tissue and removed the contact from his right eye as well. I forgot to even ask about his glasses — just watched him as he did it. Then three of our classmates came back, each holding a large umbrella.

“Where’d you get those?”

“The staff gave them to us.”

“Cool, they look super traditional!”

They all looked up happily at the umbrellas, so I glanced up too. They weren’t the cheap plastic kind you get at convenience stores — they were elegant *wagasa*, Japanese paper umbrellas, decorated with intricate designs that matched the scenery. Honestly, they were too beautiful for a rainy night.

Still, even if they were big, could three people really fit under one? As I wondered, Morisaki looked over at Hioki.

“What’s he doing?”

“Oh, he said he cried so much he lost his contact.”

It wasn’t actually from crying, so I figured it was fine to tease him a little. I couldn’t really relate to bad eyesight anyway, so explaining that part wasn’t easy. When I said it jokingly, I heard a small sigh behind me. Hioki murmured “Yeah,” then stepped beside me. He really couldn’t see — his eyes squinted tightly like the light hurt.

“Let’s move already!”

Our homeroom teacher’s voice signaled us to split into two groups and start walking through the unfamiliar night streets.

It really was the city — bright lights everywhere, so different from my

quiet hometown where nights were dim.

When I looked down again, Hioki was walking half a step behind me, still holding tightly onto the strap of my backpack and staring at the ground as if it were his only guide.

My umbrella wasn't as big as the others', so both of us were getting wet. Plus, with him tugging on the strap, my backpack kept slipping off my shoulder — honestly, it was a bit of a problem.

"This way's better."

Saying that, I took Hioki's hand off the strap and held it directly. I doubted he'd refuse, but I still glanced at him to check. To my surprise, he looked... relieved.

It was dark, so I couldn't see clearly, but I was pretty sure that was the expression on his face.

We boarded the bus still holding hands, and of course, classmates gave us curious looks. Ignoring their stares, I led him to our seats and gently tugged his hand, guiding him down.

"Thanks. Seriously, you saved me today."

"You'll need help again when we get to the inn, right? I think you're thanking me a little early."

"Huh…? Oh, right. Still, thanks."

"Yeah."

His sleepy, drawn-out voice made me laugh before I could stop myself. Honestly, it was kind of nice that his bad eyesight gave me an excuse to stay close.

As the bus started moving, Nakazato — who'd gotten drenched — leaned over. "You got a towel?"

"Sorry, no."

I shook my head and glanced at Hioki to see if he had one, but he was already leaning back in his seat, eyes closed.

Trying to sleep again? After all that napping?

"Don't fall asleep, it's hard to wake you up."

“I’m just closing my eyes. I’m fine.”

He sounded irritated when I nudged him, confirming my suspicion that he *had* been about to doze off.

Annoyed by his tone, I grabbed his shoulder again— but then I realized my hand had been caught.

He was holding it.

It took me a few seconds to register that *he* had been the one to take my hand. Why? It wasn’t like we were in a “hand-holding” situation… Oh, maybe it was because he couldn’t see and felt uneasy?

Tsumugi, my little brother, sometimes grabbed my hand for no reason too — maybe it was the same kind of thing.

Thinking that, I tightened my grip back, holding his hand properly. After all, I was the one who insisted he join our group, so if he was feeling anxious, it was my job to make him feel safe.

✳

Even when we arrived at the inn, while listening to the hostess’s welcome speech and then the head teacher’s instructions, I still hadn’t let go of Hioki’s hand. Either he wasn’t embarrassed anymore or had just given up — because he was holding mine firmly too.

“Come get your room keys!”

The grade coordinator’s voice echoed through the entrance hall. Students started chattering as they formed lines.

The rooms were apparently named after flowers. While I was talking with Nakazato about that, the coordinator called out again:

“Everyone got their keys? Okay, move to the main hall!”

At that moment, Hioki’s hand twitched in mine.

When I looked down, his face showed confusion and anxiety. He started glancing around, squinting as if trying to find something.

He squeezed my hand tighter — probably out of nervousness. I tried to calm him down.

“Want me to tell the teacher?”

He probably wanted his glasses now.

When I leaned closer and asked, he nodded. So I let go of his hand and went to find our homeroom teacher.

“Hey, where you going, Watarai?”

Pushing through the crowd, I heard someone call out. Turning, I saw a classmate — the one who’d been teasing Nakazato and the others earlier.

“You seen our teacher?”

“Hmm? You guys know where 5th class’s teacher is?”

He turned to his group — a mix of guys and girls. They blinked up at me for a second, then one of the girls suddenly pointed.

“Ah! Over there — that person talking at the reception desk!”

I looked where she pointed — sure enough, there was our teacher’s back. Nice, saved me the trouble.

“Thanks.”

“No problem~ you can repay me anytime!”

The girl smiled brightly.

Repay her? For what? I hadn’t even asked her to look. Still, I forced a polite smile and pointed at my friend.

“Get your thanks from him.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean!”

“You can repay me by being my friend instead!”

As my friend protested and the girl grinned with her phone in hand, I smiled again and headed toward the reception desk.

“Friend,” huh. I was the one struggling to make progress right now — she had no idea how hard that was.

Trying to shake off my irritation, I finally reached the teacher, who’d just finished talking to the staff.

“Excuse me, sensei. Is it okay if I go back to the room to get glasses?”

“Huh? Watarai, do *you* wear glasses?”

“No, it’s not for me — it’s for Hioki.”

“Ah, I see. Can you come back right away?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Don’t get lost, okay?”

“Thank you.”

After a quick bow, I hurried back to Hioki.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

They were still chatting, but I slipped in quietly and took Hioki’s hand again.

✳

“Hey… really, thanks for everything today.”

We were walking down the hallway, looking for the door labeled *Sunflower*, when Hioki suddenly spoke.

Maybe because it was such a quiet corridor, his voice sounded extra clear.

“Don’t worry about it, I just… ah, never mind.”

I was about to say, *I’m just glad I got to know you better,* but realized how weird that would sound out of nowhere.

Better to save that kind of thing until after the trip— or maybe when the school year changes.

Since I stopped mid-sentence, Hioki looked at me with mild confusion, probably wondering what I’d meant to say.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Now you’re making me even more curious.”

I was sorry, but I couldn't tell him. Having no other choice, I went quiet again and fixed my attention on the nameplate of the room.

After a short silence, Hioki changed the subject for me. "I guess it's dinner time soon."

"Probably Japanese food," I replied.

"It *is* a ryokan, after all," I added, and stopped in front of the room we were looking for. I took the key Hioki handed me, slid it into the lock, and with a *click*, the door opened slightly.

"I'll wait here."

"Thanks."

When I reluctantly let go of his hand, Hioki tilted his head a little in confusion, then stepped up into the tatami room.

A few moments later, I heard some noises from inside, and I let out a deep sigh.

(What the hell am I even doing…)

I buried my face in my hands as I thought back on what had just happened. Now that there was no reason left to hold Hioki's hand anymore, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed.

It wasn't that I wanted to hold his hand—it was just that I wanted some excuse to stay by his side.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

When I looked up at his voice, Hioki was wearing the same round glasses he'd worn on the day he had the eye patch.

He hurried over to me—and suddenly stumbled forward.

I panicked and reached out, but couldn't catch him properly. Hioki's face slammed right into my chest.

At least it wasn't the floor he hit, but… that probably still hurt.

"…Thanks."

His voice was barely above a whisper.

When I looked down, his face was red all the way from his ears to his neck. Was it embarrassment, or pain that almost brought him to tears? What if his nose was bleeding?

I *thought* I'd been gentle, but maybe I'd grabbed him too hard in my rush. When I cupped his cheeks and tilted his face up, his expression was twisted like he was about to cry.

No bleeding, thankfully—but yeah, that must've hurt.

"You hurt anywhere?"

"Uh—ah, no, I'm fine, really."

For some reason, he answered me in polite speech.

Had he hit his head so hard he forgot how we usually talk? That would be… bad. Worried for more reasons than one, I checked if he'd hurt himself anywhere else. Hioki didn't resist, didn't even try to move away from my arms—he just kept looking up at me.

The more he stared, the more I started feeling embarrassed too.

Just as I was about to let go, he mumbled something softly:

"I'll do anything, just please forgive me."

Wait—what?

I blinked, trying to process what I'd just heard.

I'll do anything, just please forgive me.

That's what Hioki had said.

"Heh."

I had no idea what he wanted forgiveness for—but that was definitely something useful to remember.

Still smiling, I helped him stand up straight, opened the door, and waited for him to come out.

When he finally stepped into the hallway, he looked completely puzzled, like there were question marks floating over his head.

Apparently, that line had slipped out unconsciously.

After locking the door, I started walking, and Hioki naturally fell in beside me. There was no reason to hold hands anymore.

“Hey, about what I said earlier—could you just forget it?”

“Nope.”

Hioki asked, probably realizing what he’d said, but I shook my head. Sorry, but I wasn’t going to forget that easily.

When I glanced over, Hioki was looking up at me, resigned.

“Go easy on me, okay?”

“Sure.”

Well, since I had his permission now—someday, I’d definitely use that against him.

✳

“Your vibe’s kinda different.”

“You look younger.”

“Like someone’s gonna shake you down for lunch money.”

Once we sat around the round table, Nakazato and the others started throwing out their impressions of Hioki. They’d seen him before, yet they reacted like it was their first time. Now that they mentioned it, he *did* seem a little different—quieter, softer somehow. The round frames really did make him look a bit younger. While I was watching Hioki’s side profile, clearly unimpressed with all the comments, Nakazato hurried to add— “Ah, no, no! Sorry! I meant cute, like, *in a good way*!”

Cute…? Well, maybe that’s closer than “cool,” I guess. His face gave nothing away—not annoyed, not pleased—just the usual calm.

“Alright, everyone! Great job on your first day of the school trip—”

While I was idly spinning the lazy Susan, the head teacher’s voice echoed through the banquet hall. As soon as the mic was turned off after a short greeting, the place filled with chatter and clinking dishes.

“Hey, let’s do a toast!”

At Hotta's suggestion, everyone grabbed bottles of oolong tea lined up on the table. Oh—right. I should pour one for Hioki too.

I was just about to ask what he wanted when he reached out first. "I'll have that too," he said, his eyes glancing up through his lenses. It hit me then—he didn't need help anymore.

"Pass me your glass."

"Thanks."

"Mm."

When I reached out, he handed the glass over without hesitation. I wasn't trying to help him, really—it's just that I happened to be holding the bottle. I told myself that as I poured the rest of the tea and handed it back to him, both his hands waiting for it.

"Cheers~!"

At Hotta's cue, our glasses clinked together. The oolong tea tasted better than it had in weeks. After the toast, I turned to Morisaki, who'd been recording everything on his phone.

"Send me that video."

I wanted to keep as many memories as possible—photos, videos, anything. Especially the ones with Hioki in them.

"Oh, me too."

"I'll drop it in the group chat."

"Thanks."

Nakazato chimed in, and Morisaki nodded before putting his phone away. When I looked back, Hioki and Hotta were talking about something. Seeing them like that made me squint a little. Maybe it was just Hotta's friendliness, but they seemed unusually close—too close, maybe. Or maybe I was just imagining things.

"Hey, Hioki, you don't use Daylog? Give me your account."

Hotta's voice cut into my thoughts.

"I wanna know too," I added before I could stop myself.

It was rude to butt in, but it wouldn't be fair if Hotta got to know and I didn't. When I looked up from my phone, Hioki had an awkward look on his face.

"I don't use it. I don't even have an account."

Wait, seriously?

That caught me off guard. Daylog was the go-to SNS for students—hell, even celebrities used it.

Then again, Hioki didn't even know that animal personality app before… what *does* he do in his free time?

"Then let's make one when we get back to the room."

I said it casually. If he didn't want to, fine—but if he did, that'd make me happy. I waited for his answer, and after some encouragement from the others, he nodded easily.

"So what do people even post on there?" he asked while going back to his food.

"Stuff like that toast video, or selfies from the bus," Morisaki said. "Or photos from trips, like right now—this is perfect posting material," Nakazato added.

Hioki nodded as if he got it now.

I wondered what he'd post. Maybe photos with us? Or scenery? Or… friends. For some reason, just picturing it made my chest tighten, not with joy, but something sharp and restless.

"You can post non-people stuff too—like landscapes. You said you liked scenery, right?"

When I said that, Hioki smiled a little more genuinely than before. Guess that was more his thing. I felt relieved and picked my chopsticks back up. Oh, and another new discovery—Hioki could really eat. Even after we'd all finished, he was still going. He even ate Nakazato's slice of melon when dessert came out.

"Everyone finished eating? As I mentioned when we arrived—"

After the teacher's closing remarks, we waited for the doors to open. Friends from other classes came over to chat—one of them was that guy who'd asked about the teacher earlier.

“Hey, Watarai, which room are you in? Can we come hang out?”

“No way, we’ve already got five people for cards.”

“Aw, come on, cards are more fun with a crowd!”

We hadn’t even planned anything, and no one had brought playing cards, but I still used that as an excuse to turn down my friends when they asked to come hang out. My eyes drifted over to Hioki, who I’d left sitting alone.

But he wasn’t alone anymore—he was chatting with two of his friends. One of them I recognized from this morning, the loud one, and the other I’d never seen before. Watching Hioki laugh with them stirred up that same restless, prickling feeling in my chest again.

“Hey, you listening?”

“Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t.”

“I said—where are you going during tomorrow’s free time?”

I pulled my focus back to the friend in front of me and told him “the theme park.” It was apparently a popular choice; most of the other groups seemed to have the same plan. After a bit of small talk, I waved them off and looked back at Hioki again.

One of the guys was ruffling Hioki’s hair. He didn’t brush the hand away—just took it like it was nothing. His expression looked softer than usual, maybe even content.

“…”

Once Hioki makes that account, he’ll probably post pictures with *them* too, huh? They’ve known him longer, have more memories together, more photos to choose from… The thought burned inside me again, slow and bitter. Then, suddenly, Hioki’s friends looked my way. Our eyes met for a second before they quickly turned away and slipped out of the hall.

Once their backs disappeared, I finally stood up.

“Who were those guys just now?”

I walked over to Hioki’s side and peered at his face as he adjusted his hair. I tried to sound casual, like I was just making conversation, but my voice came out tighter than I’d meant.

“Friends from club.”

“…I see.”

From club, huh. That would explain the casual touches, the closeness. Honestly, I was jealous.

As if to overwrite the spot where those two had touched him, I reached out and ruffled his hair myself. Hioki didn’t stop me—just let me do it.

It’s not that I wanted him to look happy when I touched him, or anything like that. But something about it still felt off.

When I touched him, I always needed a reason—his hair’s sticking up, or his vision’s bad— something to justify it.

What exactly was I expecting from Hioki? The heavy feeling returned, and I quietly pulled my hand back.

✳

Waiting for our turn at the bath was *so* boring. Pretending to scroll through my phone, I watched Hioki through the screen’s reflection as he wrote in his trip journal. He always gave off this serious impression, but his handwriting wasn’t great. Not that being serious automatically means good handwriting, but still—it was kind of funny how he was writing the characters extra big just to fill up space. Maybe that said something about his personality, too.

I was supposed to write mine as well, but I couldn’t bring myself to start.

“Hioki, your account.”

“I’ll make it after I finish this.”

Right, the account. I’d been the one to suggest it, but now I wasn’t sure I even wanted to go through with it. Still, not adding him wasn’t an option. So I waited, watching him until he pulled out his phone. I moved closer to scan the QR code.

“All done.”

Hioki held up his phone, showing the new, empty account. I smiled without thinking when I saw the blank profile. Using Nakazato’s help, I opened my own QR screen and scanned his, then hit the “Follow”

button. Seeing my icon appear in his followers list made me grin even wider.

“You guys are like, famous or something,” Hioki muttered.

He must’ve seen the follower count.

How *had* that number gotten so high again? Oh, right—back when I was dating my ex, she always tagged me in her posts. She used tons of hashtags, so my followers kept increasing. After we broke up, I deleted that account, but people still managed to find my new one. Even when I set it to private, the flood of follow requests didn’t stop, so I gave up and left it open.

I was still half lost in thought when a sudden knock on the door broke the silence.

“It’s our class’s turn for the bath,” Hotta said after checking.

That was our cue. We grabbed our clothes and headed for the large bathhouse. For the record, I *did* notice Hioki flinch at the knock.

The changing room was crowded — students from Class 4, some regular guests, and now even Class 5 had joined in. We could leave our things wherever we wanted, but most groups stayed close together.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hioki take off his glasses, so I spoke up.

“Hey, Hioki, you okay without those in the bath?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t slip.”

“…I’ll try my best.”

That didn’t sound reassuring at all. His eyesight was bad enough that he usually needed something to hold onto — there was no way he’d actually be fine. I was about to offer to help when the light caught on someone’s pale, toned upper body. He looked like an athlete, though not tanned. Judging from the racket hanging on his back earlier, probably badminton.

I must’ve spaced out, because by the time I looked back, Hioki had already started unbuckling his belt. For some reason, I turned my gaze

away. It's not like I'd care — we're both guys — but it's not exactly something you stare at.

As I reached for my own shirt, I realized the space next to me had gone quiet.

"…Crap, I forgot to tell him I'd help."

Muttering that, I hurriedly stripped and rushed into the bathing area — only to lose him again. I sighed at my own lack of learning.

Even though I was in a hurry, I stopped short after entering. The place was huge, way bigger than I expected. Dozens of students stood under the showers, all facing down or rinsing their hair — I couldn't tell who was Hioki. Worst of all, the showers split into two sides: right and left.

Right or left…? Not like I could *sense* where he was.

"Hioki's over there," someone said from behind.

"Huh? Oh— thanks."

It was Morisaki. He pointed to the front right corner, then started walking off. I didn't even get the chance to ask how he knew I was looking for Hioki.

Following behind him, I suddenly heard Hioki's startled, "Whoa!" Looking down, I saw him fumbling around with his hands like he was trying to find something.

"You need help with the water?" I asked, reaching for the handle.

"What are you doing?" Morisaki asked, half exasperated. "Change this from cold to hot," Hioki said.

Ah. So he wasn't trying to *stop* the shower—he was freezing.

Feeling a little sorry for him, I turned the handle to adjust the temperature. Honestly, if it was going to end up like this, he could've just let me come with him in the first place.

"I told you you might not be fine," I muttered.

Hioki wiped the water from his eyes, frowning but still mumbling a quiet, "Thanks."

"It's fine. Just—wait for me when you're done, okay?"

He didn't answer right away. Maybe he thought he was bothering me. When I glanced over, he looked like he was about to say something, so I spoke first.

"I'll seriously freak out if you slip, okay?"

At that, he fell silent and reached for the conditioner. I took that as a win and smirked a little as I washed up quickly.

When Hioki finished before me, he just stared at the pattern on the tiles, like he was trying to pass time. I couldn't tell if he was actually looking at it or not, but once I hung my showerhead back, I called out, "Thanks for waiting."

I held my hand out so he wouldn't fall. Hioki looked up slowly and took it. With his forehead visible like that, he looked like a completely different person.

Ignoring Morisaki's teasing comment about how Hioki looked like a little kid, I led him toward the main bath. But just as we reached it, he tugged my arm lightly.

"Thanks, you can let go now."

Fair enough. No need to hold hands in the water. I let go and sat down next to him.

The hot water quickly turned his skin red, spreading up to his face until he looked flushed all over. Maybe he had thin skin or good circulation.

"Hey, you boys in high school?"

Hotta and Nakazato had joined us, and while we were talking about going to the beach tomorrow, some old man nearby struck up a conversation. Judging by his accent, he was local.

"Yeah, we're on a school trip," Hioki answered.

"Ha-ha! You eatin' good? Where you from?"

The man laughed heartily and slapped Hioki's shoulder. My brows furrowed. Was that really necessary?

As I tried to come up with something polite to say, the man suddenly reached out and *grabbed Hioki's stomach.*

“You gotta eat and build some muscle! Can’t protect the girls if you’re this skinny, huh?”

My mind went blank for a second. Then I heard Hioki’s small, awkward gasp beside me. He was covering his mouth, clearly uncomfortable.

“Oh! Sorry, sorry! Ticklish, huh?” the man laughed again, slapping his shoulder once more.

It didn’t seem like he had bad intentions, but that almost made it worse. The irritation burned in my chest. When I saw Hioki shift away slightly, I grabbed his arm and pulled him up from the bath.

“Uh, we should get going. Thanks for the chat,” I said quickly, bowing just enough before leading Hioki toward the changing room.

I’d planned to relax, but the whole thing left a sour taste in my mouth. For Hioki, it must’ve been even worse. I just hoped it didn’t mess with him too much.

“You okay?” I asked once we were back, as he dried his hair.

He frowned in embarrassment, probably replaying the scene in his head. “Didn’t think I’d get harassed in a bath.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“I’m not *that* scrawny, though.”

“Oh—that’s the part you care about?”

He clearly had other things on his mind, but maybe leaving him be was best for now.

I watched him head toward the dryers, then turned toward the exit.

“You’re not going with him?” Nakazato asked.

I shook my head. “Nah.”

Stepping into the hallway, the cool air wrapped around my overheated body.

✳

It had been twenty minutes since I got back to the room, and Hioki

still hadn't returned. No way it took that long just to dry his hair. Even after the four of us finished getting ready, he was still missing.

"What time should we wake up tomorrow?"

"Let's just set alarms every five minutes."

"Whoever wakes first turns them all off."

While the others fussed with alarms, I stood up, ready to go look for him—just as the door opened. Hioki walked in, looking tired.

Please tell me he didn't get harassed *again.*

"You're late. Something happen?"

"Nah, just ran into some friends and talked for a bit."

He smiled lightly and disappeared into the washroom. Yeah, right. Talking to friends doesn't make you look *that* drained. But I couldn't press him —not when we weren't even close enough for him to open up.

As I sat there feeling helpless, I noticed Morisaki heading toward the washroom.

"Hey, pillow fights are totally school-trip energy, right?"

"—Ow!"

Before I could react, my vision went dark and my nose stung. I'd taken a direct hit from a flying pillow. I threw it back at Nakazato, but he dodged easily.

"Hey, stop it, you'll kick up dust," Hotta complained. "Let me just hit Nakazato once."

"Rude!"

Ignoring him, I grabbed another pillow—but before I could throw it, Morisaki's voice came from the washroom.

"Hey, come here! Let's take a picture!"

We all exchanged looks, quickly fixed our hair, and followed him in. After giving in to his demand for a group photo, we were about to leave when Morisaki tugged my arm. I turned to see him grinning,

phone in hand.

“Look.”

“…What?”

“Want me to send it to you?”

On his screen was a photo of him and Hioki together. He was *way* too pleased with himself. That’s when I realized he was teasing me on purpose.

“No thanks. I’ll take my own.”

“Suit yourself.”

He lowered his phone and walked back to the room.

Still, I couldn’t help feeling jealous. So I called Hioki over and pulled him back into the washroom. I did feel a bit guilty—he was clearly tired—but I couldn’t let Morisaki have the last laugh.

This was the first time Hioki and I had taken a picture alone together. The thought made my chest feel weirdly full. But when I saw my reflection on the screen, my expression looked way too excited.

“The lighting’s best in here,” I said casually, stalling for time as I adjusted the angle again and again, trying to calm my face down.

Hioki, meanwhile, only had one pose: a peace sign. He held it, frozen, every time.

“Mind if I take a few more?”

“Sure.”

“Can you wink?”

“Hmm… I’ll try.”

Hioki squinted one eye tightly as he said that. He wasn’t bad at it, but not particularly good either. That awkward in-between felt very much like him. I mimicked him, closed one eye, and pressed the shutter.

“Next, can you take off your glasses?”

“Got it.”

After confirming that Hioki placed his glasses on the sink, I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Then, reaching out quietly, I picked up his glasses.

“Mind if I try them on?”

“Sure, but they’re super strong.”

“For real? Well, I’ll probably be fine.”

In the end, I wasn’t fine — my vision swam instantly. Still, the photos turned out surprisingly good, so it was all worth it.

As I checked through the shots, a grin spread naturally across my face. Without his glasses, Hioki’s brows furrowed slightly, as if compensating for the sudden clarity loss. That serious look made me stifle a laugh — and that’s when Hioki spoke.

“Can I put them back on now?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Grateful that Hioki humored me despite being tired, I turned back to the camera roll, favorited a few photos, and left the changing room.

“Hey, Hioki, do you have a girlfriend?”

Back in the tatami room, as I plugged in my phone to charge, a snippet of conversation caught my ear. I paused my packing for tomorrow, moved to the futon, and sat beside Hioki.

“Ah—sorry to disappoint, but no.”

“Wait, didn’t you have one in middle school?”

“That’s probably a misunderstanding.”

That’s when I learned for the first time that Hioki and Hotta went to the same middle school — no wonder they seemed so close. Relieved, I exhaled and shifted my focus back to Hioki. Apparently, despite a few rumors, Hioki had never actually dated anyone. That lined up with what I’d imagined — he didn’t seem the type to have much romantic experience. Once his story ended, the conversation turned to familiar topics again. Still, it didn’t seem fair for Hioki to do all the talking.

“Okay then… what’s your type?”

After we'd finished our turn, Hioki awkwardly tried to change the subject. Given the topic, I couldn't blame him.

"What about you, Hioki?"

"I'll go last."

Of course, he wouldn't answer that easily. Gesturing for us to go first, he leaned back, ready to listen.

"Then, let's start with Morisaki."

Hotta passed the question to Morisaki, who lifted his head from his pillow and stared at the ceiling, deep in thought. After a few seconds, his gaze shifted back to us.

"…a beautiful woman who's not a hassle?"

For some reason, it came out as a question. Nakazato, Hotta, and Hioki all gave him puzzled looks, curious about the phrasing.

Realizing their confusion, Morisaki chuckled faintly.

"Because she's the opposite of *that* woman."

"But isn't that kinda hard to find?"

"Yeah, probably. But since it's an ideal type question, I can dream a little. Next, Watarai."

Morisaki laid his head back down and nodded at me.

"Hmm… someone sensible but a bit scatterbrained, I guess."

Everyone turned toward me as I said that. I'd never seriously thought about my "type," but someone normal seemed safest.

"You mean like a natural airhead?"

"Hmm… not *that* much."

"So, just a little ditzy?"

"Yeah. Okay, your turn, Hotta."

After answering, I turned to Hotta.

"(Oh, so your type is Hioki then?)"

“(…Go to sleep, man.)”

I narrowed my eyes at Morisaki, whispering back. Then I glanced sideways at Hioki, worried he might’ve heard — but he hadn’t. His glasses were set aside, and he was blankly listening to Hotta.

Feeling a pang of disappointment, I focused on Hotta again.

“I think… someone graceful? Like, someone with nice manners.”

“Oh yeah? Like what exactly?”

“Hmm… like how they hold chopsticks?”

“Ah, I get that! That actually matters.”

Nakazato clapped in agreement. Still, something bugged me, so I asked Hotta:

“So is that something you notice in general, or just when you like someone?”

“If it’s *really* bad, I’d notice.”

“Oh crap… sorry if mine’s bad.”

“Nah, you’re fine. I’m not, like, some manners police.”

Hotta laughed, then nodded toward Nakazato.

“For me, it’s someone who’s fun to be around… and has a cute smile.”

“And someone who doesn’t cheat?”

“Well, yeah, that’s kind of basic human decency.”

Morisaki’s question made Nakazato lower his voice — a bit awkwardly. I sighed at Morisaki, then turned to the last person.

“So, Hioki, what kind of person do you like—wait, did he fall asleep?”

We all noticed at once. Hioki’s head drooped, his eyes fully closed.

“Hioki, sleepy?”

“…Mm.”

Peering at him confirmed it — he was completely out. His mouth

hung slightly open, and his sleepy murmur was barely audible.

“He slept on the train too, huh.”

“…Mm.”

Even half-asleep, he nodded automatically at Morisaki’s muttering. I couldn’t help but stifle another laugh.

“He’s only saying ‘mm’ now.”

“Then, hey Hioki, do you like us?”

Nakazato’s mischief flared — whispering the question by Hioki’s ear, one by one asking about each of us.

When my name came up, though, he stopped suddenly. Maybe he’d hoped for a different reaction? But Hioki’s sleepy response was the same for everyone.

“Cut it out.”

I gently pulled Nakazato away, then lifted Hioki’s blanket to cover him fully. His sleeping face was peaceful except for a faint furrow between his brows, maybe from the light. I stood and moved to the switch.

“I’m turning the lights off.”

“Thanks.”

“Wait, are teachers doing rounds?”

“Nah, door’s locked — we’re fine.”

Ignoring their chatter, I flicked off the lights, and darkness filled the room. As my eyes adjusted, I heard voices outside — the homeroom teacher and the year coordinator.

“Wait, seriously? They’re checking?”

“““What?”””

I hurriedly dove under my futon in the dark, just as the door opened. After a brief “All clear,” the footsteps faded away.

Relief washed over me — until I realized how close I’d ended up to

Hioki. In the dim light, he was still sound asleep beside me.

I slowly scooted back to the middle of my futon, when Nakazato's whisper came from the dark.

"So? Think you can get along with him?"

"Huh?"

"Hioki. Think you two'll get closer?"

"Uh… not sure. He still might be wary of me."

My honest answer drew quiet laughter from the others. I hadn't realized Morisaki knew, but apparently Nakazato and Hotta had caught on too. Heat crept up my neck — was I *that* obvious?

Then it clicked — why they'd agreed so easily before the trip.

"…When I asked if we could add Hioki to our group—"

"Yeah. That's why."

At that point, I could only laugh it off.

They'd gone along with my childish wish to be friends with Hioki.

"Well, good luck. You're the one who said you wanted him in our group," Morisaki murmured, ending the conversation.

One by one, they drifted off to sleep.

But I couldn't.

It took me over an hour after that before I finally did.

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